

**April 2021**

**Board of Governors Remarks**

A year ago, we were vacating our campuses. Today, we're vaccinating them against the virus. As of today, our campus clinics have performed over 77,000 vaccinations. UNC Health on its own across the state over 360,000. Tremendous undertaking, a lot of effort goes into making this possible. Incredibly important towards getting back to normal in the fall.

I'd very much like to begin my report, Mr. Chair, with another round of thanks to all the thousands of University employees and community volunteers who have stepped up to staff vaccine clinics. Even with the complications last week around vaccine availability, they have continued to do outstanding work in giving our frontline staff easy access to vaccines, serving the public across North Carolina as eligibility opened up, and moving quickly to vaccinate as many students as we possibly can before the summer break.

I'm going to keep saying this every time I have the chance: I strongly encourage all of our students, and every citizen of our state, to get vaccinated as soon as you can. It's the fastest way to fully reopen our campuses, our state, and our economy. A lot of work has gone into encouraging people to get vaccinated and providing great information about how vaccines work, how they're developed, and all of the rigorous work that goes into making them safe. Public health depends on public trust, and that's something we must constantly earn.

With the progress we've seen over the last few months, we are optimistic about the start of the fall semester looking much closer to normal. Like all of you, I'm eager to see students back in classrooms, back in face-to-face conversations, back to socializing and making real-world connections. It's not just because it's a happier way to live, but because it makes a real difference in the health and wellbeing of students.

It's true that our faculty and staff have done an outstanding job under very difficult circumstances since the pandemic first took hold last spring. It's also true that a great many faculty and students have struggled, profoundly, with the hardships of the year gone by. The toll on mental health has been heartbreaking, and everything I've read and heard suggests that reclaiming a shared social life is vital for our students.

I think the last year has given all of us a deeper appreciation for the real substance of life. And it has certainly given me a closer understanding of what we mean when we talk about "the college experience," and why that matters to students. We're here to provide knowledge and expertise, certainly. To help a rising generation master the skills and subjects that will propel their careers and drive our economy. But we're also helping people build fuller, richer lives — friends they'll know for decades, memories they'll hold for a lifetime, habits of thinking and being that develop as much from connecting to each other as they do from any lecture or lab. We've borne the loss of all that gracefully,

but not easily. We can't get back that lost time, but we can do our best to make up for it in the months to come.

The relief funds being made available from the federal government will help get our campuses up and running again more than a year after we began reduced operations for housing, dining, and a host of other auxiliary services. I'm glad for that added support. But we're going a step further than just restoring the old normal. I've directed chancellors to use as much of that funding as they can to offset and reduce the cost of attendance, with a special focus on housing and dining fees, for the coming years. There's no better way to support North Carolina's recovery and send a message of welcome to students.

I've asked that we put new resources into summer programs and other opportunities to accelerate credit hours, especially for students who may have fallen behind or needed to pursue a reduced class load due to the disruptions of the past year. And I'm directing all of our campuses to invest in outreach and recruitment of rural, low-income, and underrepresented students. After years of progress in welcoming more of those students across the system, the pandemic put a dent in enrollment from those groups. We need to make up that ground, and fast, to ensure fair opportunity for all North Carolinians to pursue higher education.

And, we're not letting up on the core priorities we set out four years ago, when the Board approved a strategic plan focused on affordability and access. Just as we've done every year since the start of that plan in 2017, we've just published annual performance review for each institution. The whole system made impressive progress in a very tough year, but I want to especially call out N.C. A&T, NC State, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC Charlotte, and the UNC School of the Arts for meeting or exceeding their goals on four out of five targets. And not to be outdone, UNC Greensboro nailed *all five* priority metrics for the third year in a row.

These aren't just numbers. Every percentage point improvement in rural enrollment means hundreds of students getting a life-changing opportunity. Every increase in graduation rate means more students leaving with lower debt and a valuable degree, ready to pursue their dreams and make a difference for North Carolina. So, there are real people behind these numbers, people with real responsibilities and ambitions. We don't forget it.

And I'm so glad we'll get the chance to celebrate their accomplishments in person next month. Even with so much else going on, our chancellors and their teams have done a great job coming up with contingency plans for safe, socially distanced commencement ceremonies so that the class of 2021 can enjoy the milestone they've so richly earned. The logistics to pull this off are somewhat daunting — most campuses will be holding two or more separate ceremonies, to safely accommodate everyone — but I think these occasions matter. They matter. I think it's right that we honor the work these students have put in, and that we give our faculty and staff the chance to see firsthand the joy and accomplishment they've brought for so many.



I hope all of you will have the chance to take part in one of these ceremonies. We'll be marking graduation, of course. But I can't help feeling that this year's commencement will mark so much more, a true milestone in the life of our University and our state.