



## **Inaugural Address**

**By President Peter Hans**

The story of public higher education in North Carolina is a story of pragmatic building, of creating and reforming institutions to meet the changing needs of a growing state. You see that in our nation's oldest public university in Chapel Hill, chartered in 1789 to educate the very first generation of Americans who would grow up in a constitutional democracy.

You see it in our land-grant institutions at North Carolina A&T and here at NC State, both built to answer the rising needs of an industrial, agricultural, and technological power. You see it in the teachers' colleges founded in Boone and Greensboro and Greenville to raise up the educators and civic leaders our communities needed.

You see it in the growth of veteran-serving institutions like UNC Wilmington, built to welcome returning service members in the early years of the GI Bill. And you see it most powerfully in our historically black and minority serving universities, founded to answer the highest aspirations of free citizens insisting that America's promise was equally theirs.

The history of our state is written in the history of these schools, and the UNC System inherits all of it. All of us inherit that legacy and the responsibility to care for its wellbeing.

We stand for the idea that there cannot be just one path to success in North Carolina – our state is too big and diverse for that. The benefits of higher education must be extended to more North Carolinians. That is our mission of public service. That is our calling.

Bringing these proud institutions together fifty years ago was not just an act of administrative efficiency or political engineering. It was a powerful statement of shared interest, an acknowledgment that our fate as a people truly is tied together.

We are one state, and the landscape of opportunity in Elizabeth City and Cullowhee matters just as much as the prospects for prosperity in Charlotte and Raleigh.

I never forget what an extraordinary thing it was that North Carolina — a state that was overwhelmingly poor and losing population at the beginning of the 20th century — looked with such ambition to the future.

Building and sustaining these universities was an act of hope, a belief that the problems of one era will give way to the ideas and energy of the next. I pray we will hold on to that vision and keep that faith. We've reached another moment of pragmatic building. Today's great challenge in achieving educational attainment goals doesn't require us to break ground on a new campus, but to create something even more ambitious: a second chance for the millions of adult North Carolinians who have the drive and talent to succeed in higher education but didn't necessarily have the time or opportunity when they left high school.



It's time to address our obligation to adult learners and veterans and underserved populations in a more comprehensive manner, to stand again for the idea that there's more than one path to success...to help every person realize their potential. Over the next few years, the UNC System is going to build one of the most ambitious efforts in the country to meet the needs of working adults who are ready for a college degree.

There are tens of thousands of busy North Carolinians who turn to out-of-state providers for help with career transitions. I believe there are many thousands more who will engage our brilliant faculty and dedicated staff if we have valuable credentials to offer them, that are easily accessible, flexible, and affordable.

If we fail to meet this emerging demand among nontraditional students, we leave the field wide open to bad actors. If we fail to change the curriculum to meet the changing needs of our citizens, we contribute to widening inequality.

We must stand alongside the very people who need us the most and enable their dreams to take flight. Making higher education work for more students is about more than economic opportunity. Broadening our vision of who college is for and who our institutions of higher education are meant to serve is about the health of our country in its deepest sense.

It's about bridging the political and cultural divisions that have eroded our sense of community and made our public life so discouraging in recent years. Some of the sharpest divides in our society right now are between college graduates and the majority of Americans who don't hold a four-year degree.

In our career prospects, in where we choose to live, and in the quality of life available to us — an immense gap has emerged between college graduates and their fellow citizens.

Too many of our friends and neighbors feel a sense of alienation not just from colleges and universities but from government, from media, from major institutions of all kinds. They're skeptical that their voices are heard. To help heal divisions, we must honor everyone's circumstances.

Higher education is important, and I believe it's our moral duty as a state to make that option available to all those who are ready for it and when they're ready for it. But we cannot have a healthy democracy if dignity is reserved for degree holders.

And we cannot have a healthy economy unless everyone has opportunities to advance and prosper outside of traditional programs. There must be multiple paths to success and respect in our state.

Our role as a university is to speak to the ambitions of all North Carolinians, even those who will never set foot on our campuses. Our work is about teaching and learning in the classroom, preparing people for the jobs of the future, and incredible discoveries being researched in the lab. But it's also about building a country that can hold together, forging an educational system that speaks to the needs of all North Carolinians. Earning that trust starts with holding ourselves to a higher standard of public service.



Our students have a right to expect that any good-faith encounter with the University of North Carolina is going to leave them better off than when they started.

For a long time, we have taken it for granted that going to college is always good advice, and that if people don't understand the payoff of a college degree, it's because they're not well-informed about it. And believe me, I know we do an enormous amount of good and our students change the wider world. But I also know that a lot of the frustration toward higher education is not the result of misinformation, but of experience.

There are multitudes nationally who attempted college and didn't finish, leaving with debt but no degree. And there are cautionary tales about programs with high costs and questionable outcomes, leaving some with decades of monthly loan payments but little increase in monthly wages.

It's true that many of those stories come from bad actors in the for-profit sector. But those of us in the public sector are accountable as well.

We must ensure that our offerings meet a public interest standard — that they're doing right by the students they serve and the citizens who cover a substantial share of the cost. That's one of the key reasons we have a University System, to make sure that institutions acting in the name of North Carolina are acting in the plain interests of North Carolinians. To make sure that students are graduating on time, that costs are kept in check, that students from all backgrounds and viewpoints feel welcome.

That's how you earn trust, by showing time and again that the mission of public service takes priority over all else, by proving that our institutions would rather act in quiet competence than make grand pronouncements. Creative problem-solving is needed now, not more of the same at a louder volume.

You want to hear one example of something that's never, ever going to make major news? Common course numbering. Making sure that introductory classes carry the same weight across our universities and community colleges, so that if you're among the one-third of students who start out at one place and transfer to another, you don't need a PhD in differential equations to figure out which of your credits will go with you. That's the kind of practical good housekeeping our citizens and students need from us.

Infrastructure in higher education that works so well it fades into the background. That was, I think, the vision for the UNC System, and I'm proudest on the days we keep our heads down and deliver on those 50-year-old promises of greater coordination and shared resources.

Earlier this year, when our state needed to stand up clinics to vaccinate over a hundred thousand students, staff, and citizens, officials didn't have to call seventeen different chancellors to manage a rollout. We were able to do that together. Last year, with students across our state struggling with mental health challenges at the height of the COVID pandemic, our campuses didn't have to act alone. We were able to quickly expand access to emergency telehealth services for every institution, meeting an urgent need at a critical time.



That's how a lot of our most important work happens — quietly, without much notice. And I fully intend that people will hear about our best work because of the outcomes it produces, not the fanfare with which it is announced.

Our greatest successes will happen quietly, when we will build the platforms from which others can rise. That is the whole essence of servant leadership. Building the platforms from which others can rise...

Thinking about the origins of the University and why it matters to North Carolina, we should remember that success was not inevitable. As we gather here to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UNC System, let's not forget that it was a contentious idea. There were political fights, backroom deals, protests in the streets — all the messy distractions of democracy we love to complain about.

There has never been an era of placid consensus about higher education — about what to teach, who to teach it to, and how much it should cost. And I'm glad for that because it means people care. It means they're invested. And we need that passionate devotion because our success is still not inevitable.

It never has been. It comes from the interest and energy of North Carolinians of all stripes. It comes from our ability to channel that energy into common goals. North Carolina is still one state, still a shared project that we all have an obligation to build.

And together we commit to our fellow citizens to provide a higher education that you can afford and that fits your needs, where you will feel welcome and belong regardless of your background or beliefs, and that will leave you better off than when you started.

That's what changed this first-generation college graduate's life, perhaps your life as well, and that's the vision we will pay forward to future generations.

My heart is filled with gratitude and optimism — thank you so much.