

## Remarks Delivered at Institute for Emerging Issues Webinar President Peter Hans

September 25, 2020

Good morning. I'm Peter Hans, President of the University of North Carolina System. My first day on the job was August 1, which by 2020 math feels like a decade ago.

That's because the speed and scale of what we're enduring right now has no precedent in modern American education. Millions of students unable to return to K12 classrooms; universities across the country operating with a mix of remote learning and reduced campus life; an economic crisis swifter and sharper than any in our lifetimes brought on by the pandemic.

If we've learned anything from past seasons of hardship, it's that choices we make now will resonate for years to come.

When the Great Recession took hold in 2008 and 2009, we saw a surge in college enrollments across the country. Americans responded to economic uncertainty by going back to school, looking to acquire new skills and new credentials, hoping to strengthen their prospects for stable and rewarding work.

Historically, that's been a good bet. Those with more education almost invariably fare better, in good times and bad. The unemployment statistics throughout the last recession bore that out, with college graduates remaining employed at far higher rates than those without degrees.

But underneath those encouraging statistics, there was another reality taking hold, one that I think too many policymakers and college leaders ignored. And that was the story of students who took big risks to improve their future, and lost.

That includes students who took on significant debt but left school with no degree; students who persisted but found their career options and earning potential more limited than they'd hoped; and far, far too many students who went looking for a real education and were instead deceived and defrauded by bad actors. Right here in North Carolina, thousands of students who needed our help were left to cope with the aftermath of some "schools" that borrowed the credibility of college but offered none of the value.

That hurt our students, our state, and the institutions represented here today. Because those were North Carolinians who should have been served by the amazing community colleges, by UNC System schools, by so many private universities that deliver on their promises.

When those of us in the public and nonprofit sectors fail to provide simple, compelling options for working adults on the margins (or ask them to work around our schedules), we leave the field wide open for those bad actors. When we fail to change our programs to meet the changing needs of our economy, we contribute to widening inequality. When we make a real education hard to access while a fake diploma takes nothing more than a toll-free phone call, we leave behind the very people who need us the most.

And we feed a dangerous sense of alienation and resentment that is hurting all of American higher education. It's striking that even as the benefits of a college degree remain strong, public trust in higher education has declined. People know an education is valuable; they don't always know it's within reach.

We must, in everything we do, lower the risk of pursuing opportunity. That means keeping costs in check; keeping debt low; keeping students on track to completion; and recruiting students to the schools best able to serve them.

Here at UNC we're maintaining our historical, constitutional, and moral commitment to affordability with a renewed focus on accessibility leading to opportunity that enhances both excellence and equity.

We welcomed record-setting enrollment this year, even amid the greatest disruption our country has known in generations. That's a reflection of the extraordinary work of our faculty and staff, but also the resilience of our students.

They are doing their part; we need to do ours.