

President's Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors January 20, 2022

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome back to everyone and I hope you all had a good holiday. I know a lot of the folks in our System spent a good portion of their break at work preparing for the Spring semester. The latest wave of COVID forced some quick adaptation on the part of our students, faculty, and staff, but I'm proud to say that all of our campuses are managing through this latest curveball and staying on track.

The last two years have taught us how to operate in this highly uncertain environment and still deliver the kinds of education our students expect and deserve. My ongoing thanks to everyone who's been working hard to make that happen and please let me express my appreciation to our Chancellors and all of you for providing steady leadership that balances public health and public education.

I'd like to focus this morning on our strategic plan, which is now entering its fifth and final year. We've made significant progress on our goals across the board. History teaches us that controversies come and go. But the system's performance makes clear that we've kept the focus on what really counts for our students, and we're continuing to deliver on the core promises of the University. This Board deserves a lot of credit for that, for adopting and sticking with one of the best policy programs anywhere in public higher education.

We have all seen more than our share of strategic plans in different roles we've served. They can be lengthy exercises with ambiguous ends, heavy on rhetoric and short on action, which is why I think the UNC System's approach truly stands apart. This University has operated with a sharp, well-focused plan that achieves what ought to be the goal of any policy document — influencing real-world performance for the better.

By establishing clear standards and creating unambiguous incentives for meeting them, this board built a strategic plan that lives up to its name, setting Higher Expectations for our public universities and our state. I said this during our last update, and it bears repeating: every bit of improvement in our graduation rates, in degree efficiency, in critical workforce credentials; every dollar we save on tuition and fees, every reduction in student debt — it adds up to a real impact in the quality of life for the students we serve. There are thousands of low-income students who have succeeded at our universities because of the incentives created in this plan. There are thousands of promising research projects underway because of the goals in this plan. And holding tuition steady for the past five years has saved millions for North Carolina families.

There's a strong temptation in our culture for leaders to promise big, bold, transformational change around every corner — to declare paradigm shifts and pivotal moments every other month. Now some of that energy is good and healthy, and I certainly share the desire to do big things on behalf of our state and I know you do, too. The Kitty Hawk project focused on adult learners and veterans will be innovative and important; the huge investment \$2 billion in

capital upgrades over the next few years will make a major difference on our campuses; and I hope we've all learned some valuable lessons about how to deliver education with greater flexibility over the last two years. Goodness knows we need new and creative thinking to address a lot of the challenges we face.

But people only trust us to lead those big initiatives when we're delivering on our core mission — when we get the basics right. When I talk to students and families about what they want from college, I don't really hear much about revolutionary transformations. I hear a lot about affordability, about making sure the right courses are available at the right time, and about connecting their degree to a promising career. The basics. The fundamentals.

Again, that's what I think has made this plan such a success — we're delivering on our core promises. When the five-year window for this strategic plan comes to a close this year, I propose that we revise and extend the framework that has proven so durable and effective through a period of extraordinary turbulence for higher education. We can take what we've learned and accomplished — and assess where we've fallen short as well — and renew our compact with the people of North Carolina and the students we serve.

That will mean refreshing the core goals we have now, but also considering where we can add or change metrics to address emerging needs. Improvements to our five-year graduation rates have been impressive; but improving on-time graduation would do even more to benefit students and families. We have an opportunity to get more explicit in the way we assess student debt and life outcomes for our graduates, making sure we're delivering long-range value promised in every one of our programs. And we should consider a set of goals around student mental health and well-being as well as measuring increased access for adult learners and veterans.

So, in the months ahead, as we drive toward completion of this five-year planning cycle, I'll work with all of you, with our chancellors and other campus leaders, and with policymakers across the state to consider what kind of thoughtful changes we can make for our revamped roadmap. I think those will be rich and useful discussions, illuminating some of the key areas of concern and opportunity as we emerge into the post-pandemic era of higher education. I'm genuinely excited about it, and I hope you are, as well. That's the big picture, Mr. Chairman. Onward and upward...