

**Board of Governors Meeting**  
**October 22, 2020**  
**President's Report**

As we gather today, our campuses are more than halfway through the most challenging semester in at least a generation. Fourteen of our seventeen institutions are operating with a mix of face-to-face and online instruction; three others are conducting undergraduate classes fully online while continuing research that is so critical to our state. At all of them, the faculty and staff continue to deliver a high-quality education under far-from-ideal circumstances.

We know higher education is essential work. And as we head into our eighth month of coping with the coronavirus pandemic, I want to make sure we celebrate the thousands of people showing up for our students each day — online, in person, in every way they can.

There is no pausing people's lives, which means we must be resilient and resolute in providing a life-changing education. We have had to adapt, to do our part in slowing this pandemic while also weighing the risks of lost opportunity for thousands of students. There is no perfect answer for the decisions we face — only honest grappling with a challenging situation.

My team and I are checking in every day with our chancellors, and with local and state health officials, to evaluate conditions across the state and make sure we're doing all that we can to protect the students and citizens we serve. We'll continue with the flexible approach we've shown so far, and I'm grateful to everyone who has demonstrated how we can work through the uncertainty without losing sight of our mission.

What we do know for certain is that the year ahead will bring some deep financial and operational challenges. In the Budget and Finance meeting yesterday, we laid out a budget request for the University that our recognizes reality while protecting our core academic mission. In addition to our effort to establish unified budgets throughout the System, we are taking a disciplined approach with a tightly focused explanation of our priorities.

We're asking for no new projects, no new initiatives. Our lawmakers have some hard choices ahead, given the state of the economy. We owe them a concise report of core needs, including:

- To fully fund enrollment growth, since we're one of the few universities in the country to add students this year;
- Continued support of NC Promise, which has dramatically lowered tuition and expanded opportunity at UNC Pembroke, Elizabeth City, and Western Carolina;
- Shoring up our building reserve, so we can properly operate the public assets under our care; and
- Strengthening support for our faculty and staff, who have done monumentally challenging work this year to keep students learning no matter where they are. We want to keep that deep bench of talent right here.

This is not the moment for sweeping plans; this is a moment for keeping our most important promises to the students and citizens of North Carolina, including identifying potential savings that can be carried forward into the next year. So let's get the fundamentals right. That way, we will be prepared for any scenarios that unfold and be ready to go when the windows of opportunity open.

The same economic conditions stressing the state budget will also create an unprecedented need for access to our institutions. Hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians will be seeking new careers and new opportunities. We know from past experience that many of them will choose to start that search at our state's community colleges.

We have talked for years about creating a seamless path to transfer from community colleges to our four-year universities, and, for that matter, from one UNC System school to another. I am determined, along with you, to see that happen. The ideas discussed in the Strategic Initiatives Committee yesterday and in Ed Planning — especially common course numbering — can help us get there. There's the obvious economic case for it, but I believe we also have a moral obligation in this time of deep need for North Carolina to put more options on the table for people seeking better opportunity, and to never let administrative burdens come between the students and the education they need to succeed.

I spoke at NC State's Institute for Emerging Issues last month about what happens when public institutions don't compete effectively for working adults, for time-pressed parents, for *all* the students who would benefit from a quality education at this point in their lives. When we fail to provide good, flexible options, those students wind up in the for-profit sector, where they're more likely than not to leave with a lot of debt and nothing to show for it. Or they get discouraged and don't pursue further education at all.

Tressie McMillan Cotton, who graduated from NC Central and teaches at UNC-Chapel Hill, just won a MacArthur genius grant in part for her work on how higher education has too often failed the students who need us most.

"The risk of changing jobs and moving up the professional ladder has shifted to individual workers across race, class, and gender," she wrote in her first book. "That risk makes credentials valuable only insofar as those credentials are easy to start, easy to fit into complex lives, and easy to pay for."

That's what improving our transfer policies is all about, and they're just the beginning. You'll be hearing more from me in the months ahead about simplifying financial aid, making the path to graduation clearer at all of our institutions, and additional support to teach the science of reading that will boost third grade reading proficiency. All these data points are connected and all of them are connected to our work on equity.

You can get a greater sense of why all of that work matters so much by attending our first-ever virtual open house for the entire UNC System, kicking off Monday and running through next week. The hard-working admissions, recruitment, and financial aid staff who delivered a record-breaking class this fall aren't resting on their laurels.

They're coordinating with the UNC System Office to give students across the state an online introduction to all of our public universities. Participants will hear from faculty and staff, from current students, get a virtual tour of campus — everything that's great about a campus visit, but with none of the parking hassles. I hope you'll check it out, and I hope we can keep doing this kind of efficient online outreach long after this challenging year is over, because we should be doing everything that we can to support this state in navigating this season of hardship, from researching life-saving medicines to providing life-changing educational opportunities, serving the people, whether or not they ever even set foot on our campuses.

There is much more work to come, but I'm very proud of the work we have underway together.