

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
April 20, 2023

North Carolina is growing and growing more diverse. And UNC Pembroke, thanks to the rich and fascinating history in this part of our state, is at the leading edge of a more inclusive, more dynamic future for higher education and for our country.

We're hearing a lot about diversity in American education right now — and witnessing a lot of controversy. While we're gathered here in Pembroke, seeing firsthand the success and energy of the UNC System's most diverse campus, I want to share how I think about higher education's role in welcoming and serving *all* students, and how diversity and free expression can not only coexist but strengthen one another.

One of the greatest achievements of American society in the 20th century was opening the doors of higher education to far more students than ever before. Black Americans, Native students, women, a growing Latin American population — all are welcome and represented on our campuses in a way that simply wasn't permitted a century ago.

Removing legal and institutional barriers that kept those students from pursuing their God-given potential has been extraordinarily good for the nation, and for North Carolina. We simply cannot imagine the kind of prosperity, growth, and individual opportunity now taken for granted without the hard-won progress of educational access for all.

It has also made our universities better at their mission. As UNC Pembroke's vision statement says, diversity "provides us with opportunities for discovery," embracing a breadth of different perspectives and backgrounds. UNC Pembroke is a living testament to the power of an institution that welcomes everyone in its community, a model for how our universities can embrace all those we're called to serve.

We are still short of where we need to be, especially when you look at differences in graduation rates, student debt, and other key outcomes for our students. Overcoming those disparities is a moral imperative for the University, which is why we have a strategic plan that focuses on more equitable enrollment of low-income and rural students; that tracks graduation rates by subgroup; that places a premium on reducing student debt, which we know disproportionately burdens low-income and minority students. And we are investing at historic levels in minority-serving institutions, which is long overdue.

Our goal is to build a university system where everyone in North Carolina is welcome — where North Carolinians of all backgrounds are invited, included, and supported. That's not an add-on to our mission; it's the very core of our calling as a public institution. We are committed to

serving this state, and this state is growing larger, more diverse, more vibrant and interesting by the day. We want and need that energy on our campuses, in our classrooms, in our research labs. Welcoming the extraordinary breadth of talent in our state makes us a stronger university for *everyone*.

If you look across our campuses today, you will see a range of initiatives, support programs and recruitment strategies being deployed to welcome and guide students who were not always well-represented in higher education. There are scholarship funds for low-income and first-generation students; clubs and student organizations that provide a home base for students of particular backgrounds and interests; mentoring efforts and peer counseling programs that help students build a sense of community; and a lot of brilliant work to rethink teaching strategies and redesign courses so that all students have the chance to thrive.

That is all important and worthy work, and the UNC System's strategic plan specifically endorses efforts to improve the enrollment and graduation of underrepresented students on our campuses – student success.

The *goal* of a diverse and welcoming university is not in question. A clear majority of Americans — including every ethnic group and party affiliation — say that diversity is a source of strength for the nation, and that schools should welcome diversity as a positive thing.

Still, the challenge of how we achieve those goals can and *must be* subject to debate. There is no single, correct way of thinking about diversity, let alone promoting it. Our embrace of openness and pluralism must include an openness to different ideas about representation and the role of education in building a more just society. It must include a tolerance — an appreciation, even — for those who disagree with our preferred way of thinking. It must include a bedrock commitment to academic freedom and freedom of thought so that we can truly benefit from the different perspectives and life experiences that our students and faculty bring with them.

I have heard the argument that our ideals of inclusion and free expression are in tension with one another, and that free speech or free inquiry must sometimes yield in order to make the University a welcoming place for all. I respectfully disagree. Diversity and free expression enhance one another, and our universities must honor both. We can't learn from one another if we're not free to speak — and eager to listen.

We can't benefit from diversity unless we have the opportunity to share our life experiences and worldviews with confidence that they'll be heard and respected.

That means we cannot compel a single way of thinking about diversity. We cannot enforce a false consensus about how to define equity in the complex and challenging context of campus

life. We can't declare a single vision of inclusion to be the right one, when we know there are many different ideas about what constitutes a welcoming environment.

There are honest, well-meaning differences of opinion about how American society ought to approach questions of race, gender, and any number of other fraught, understandably sensitive issues. There's no consensus about these issues even among minority communities. While the overwhelming majority of Americans, of all races and backgrounds, agree that discrimination is absolutely wrong and should have no place in our schools, things get much more complicated from there. We cannot call an end to these debates on our campuses when they remain such an active and unsettled part of American public life.

Our universities must make room for those good-faith conversations. That does not mean we excuse hate or bigotry. It does mean preserving space for people of goodwill to hold different visions of what progress and fairness should look like.

From my professors, my mentors, and my reading of higher education's history, I draw a deep sense of humility when it comes to declaring a single, right answer to grand societal challenges. There are just too many examples of people in positions of power getting things confidently, righteously wrong.

The well-structured contest of ideas and perspectives is how we work toward common understanding, continuing the University's age-old calling of discovering new knowledge and putting it to work. It's how we prepare our graduates for the world they're going to enter, where challenging conversations are part of life.

I see that work happening every day on our campuses. I see it happening with joy and energy right here in Pembroke. This institution proves every single day that we are a better university — a better country — when we embrace the talent and ambition of all our people.

Universities are meant to be places of connection, of coming together, and that's exactly what we see all around us here in Pembroke. It's a privilege to be here. Go Braves.