

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
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We talk often about public higher education as a compact — a mutual promise between our universities and the people of this state. And the heart of that promise is simple: in exchange for generous public funding, we will keep a life-changing education within easy reach of North Carolina families. People need to know that these institutions they support are ready and eager to welcome students from every walk of life, and that means keeping them affordable to families at all income levels.

Low tuition, in other words, is our most basic public trust. It is a state constitutional commitment in North Carolina, and I often speak of it as a moral obligation as well.

To the extent that faith in higher education has eroded in recent years — and there is a great deal of evidence that it has, at least nationally — I believe escalating cost has been one key factor. No matter how well designed our aid policies, no matter how welcoming our words, you simply cannot expect people who work hard putting food on their kitchen tables to support universities if they are priced like luxury goods.

In many states across the country, the basic compact between public universities and the people they serve has broken down, with tuition rising beyond the means of normal families. According to data from the College Board, tuition at four-year public universities nationwide more than doubled over the last 30 years — increasing by 102 percent — while median family income grew only about 39 percent. That is a recipe for resentment and skepticism toward higher education.

And that's why I am so encouraged by our record here in North Carolina. Since 2020, when I started in this role, in-state tuition has not budged while state funding for the UNC System has increased by 32 percent. Please allow me to emphasize 32 percent — twice the rate of inflation during those years. Thank you to the taxpayers of this state and their elected representatives.

That's the compact in action, the reason we enjoy both low cost and high quality. Graduation rates are up, debt among our graduates is down, and tuition remains near the very bottom of all peers across the nation. Together, we have cemented North Carolina's long-cherished reputation for treating higher education like the public good that it is.

It is not a coincidence that we've seen much stronger state support over the last few years alongside what will be a nine-year halt to tuition increases. The sharp rise in student costs during the first two decades of this century put a real strain on the relationship between the public and the American public university. Our return to disciplined control of tuition costs in

recent years has helped rebuild trust and reinforce the compact between our people and North Carolina public universities.

It's worth remembering why low tuition has been such a cornerstone of North Carolina's success.

- First, affordable tuition lowers the risk of opportunity. It ensures that students don't have to take on burdensome debt to pursue an education, and that they can afford to make their academic decisions out of conviction and curiosity instead of financial anxiety. Rising concern about debt and economic prospects has been a key reason for the decline in traditional academic majors — everything from art and music to math and humanities — in favor of more professionally oriented degrees. If we want to sustain the broad-minded mission of higher education in addition to career preparation — and I absolutely do — then low tuition is crucial.
- Low tuition is also vital for the powerful message it sends about openness and belonging. Students and families need assurance that our public universities belong to them as much as anyone else. That message is awfully hard to deliver if the sticker price is beyond the means of the working class. We've done important work to expand and simplify financial aid, and grants and scholarships will remain vital for protecting fair access to a college education. But no aid policy or messaging strategy can compete with the power and directness of affordable tuition.
- Finally, I think we often overlook how much low cost contributes to the academic strength and intellectual vibrancy of our institutions. I cannot tell you how often I meet brilliant professors, researchers, chancellors, and distinguished alumni who were the first in their families to attend college, who owe their success to having the freedom to navigate life with minimal debt and maximum opportunity. It is precisely because our universities continue to draw talent from across our society — from people of different backgrounds, beliefs, and aspirations — that they can fulfill their mission of research, discovery, and the pursuit of truth.

It is plain to me that any institution begins to suffer when it draws too much from a narrow slice of society — from only the wealthiest families, or only the best-funded high schools, or only those with specific career aspirations. That's how you end up with a narrowing of debate, a constraining of ideas, a university that has lost touch with the dynamic reality of the state it's meant to serve.

We don't want a public university that stands apart from the rest of North Carolina; we should always be in a vibrant, productive conversation with all the people of this state, because that conversation makes us smarter and better at what we do. Affordable tuition keeps this university grounded in the needs and concerns of our whole state, and that's very much to our mutual benefit.

After a recent speech where I touched on many of these same points, a student came up and shared her gratitude for low tuition. She collapsed in my arms crying. The tears streaming down her cheeks – that’s not an apocryphal story; it is a real and very human expression of appreciation. It was incredibly moving for me and those who witnessed it. That’s a legacy this board and the people of our state can take pride in.