

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
July 19, 2023

There has been a lot of discussion in recent weeks on college admissions and almost all of it has focused on the small number of universities with low admissions rates. The question of who attends our country's most selective colleges is certainly important, and it has always attracted outsized attention. Admissions decisions at places like Harvard and UNC Chapel Hill affect only a tiny percentage of the country's students, but they drive huge perceptions and misperceptions that can impact the way families across the country think about higher education.

Nationwide, about six percent of students attend a university that might be considered highly selective. Everybody else — the vast, vast majority of America's university students — are enrolling in schools that welcome nearly all qualified students. These schools, including most of our public universities, are not focused on how to be better gatekeepers. They're focused on getting more students through the gate and on an affordable path to graduation. The big challenge facing American higher education is not a scarcity of highly selective admissions slots.

More than three years since the disruption of the pandemic, we're still missing well more than a million college students across the nation. They're not in our classrooms. They're not enrolling in community colleges. And a troubling number of them are not showing up in the workforce, either. A Richmond Federal Reserve labor study reports that, in 2022, 18.7% of men and 12.4% of women 25 to 34 years old lived at home with their parents. And a census study showed that 25% of these adults did not work a single hour in a week or go to school.

That's a cultural and economic shift that should concern all of us, another symptom of social disconnection for a large number of people with very uncertain consequences for American society.

The students who are enrolling across the UNC System are arriving in the aftermath of the deepest disruption to K12 schooling in more than a century. Based on everything we can see, from test scores to mental health challenges, those students will need more support, more encouragement, more academic help to succeed in higher education and prepare for the world beyond.

That world is going to be marked by career paths and job transitions that are demanding. The forces of technology and automation that transformed the factory floor over the past generation may now disrupt the white-collar settings where many of our graduates make their living. The rapid progress we're seeing in machine learning and artificial intelligence will mean that more people, at more moments in their lives and careers, will need to refresh their human intelligence to adapt and thrive. Our universities must be agile enough to meet the need for

education across a lifetime and a lifelong resource for adult learners who need new skills, new opportunities, new connections in a fast-changing world.

Not enough people see us that way right now. Confidence in higher education is at historic lows, according to Gallup polling released just two weeks ago. Barely a third of Americans have a great deal of faith in colleges and universities. Higher education is not alone in seeing institutional trust reach new lows. But I think much of it has to do with a sense that higher education has become distracted from our core mission of open opportunity, that too much time is spent on political activism and not enough time on affordability, quality, and career outcomes.

We can answer these challenges. It will take real focus and commitment. And it's going to require that we clearly communicate that our sixteen public universities offer great options for all North Carolinians. North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing, most vibrant places in the country, and just named by CNBC as the number one state to do business -- again. We draw and cultivate talent from all walks of life, welcoming people of every background and belief. That's an enormous blessing and a source of deep strength.

It's extraordinary to me, having grown up here, to see the rich and interesting ways North Carolina has grown and changed. The University of North Carolina has grown and changed right along with it. And we will continue our mission of service, so everyone has meaningful choices and multiple paths to success. Again, let's remember that a small number nationally attend a university that might be considered highly selective. But everyone else depends on the work we do in one way or another. For example, everyone goes to fourth grade where they either learn to read well or not, in large part depending on how well we prepare their teachers. That's the context and scale of what lies ahead for us.