

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
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Higher education depends on trust. We ask students and families to take an enormous leap of faith when they decide to pursue a college degree, and we have a responsibility to meet their commitment in good faith. I've spoken before about a public interest standard for our institutions and programs — a promise that any student who puts in the time and the work should emerge better off for the experience.

It's time for higher education to have an accreditation option that's equally committed to the public interest, an accreditor purpose-built for assessing and improving the public institutions that are the workhorses of American higher education. And it's time for an accreditor laser focused on student outcomes.

We are working alongside our peers and partners in other well-regarded public university systems to build the Commission for Public Higher Education. This new accreditor will work exclusively with public universities that want to get back to the approach originally outlined in the 1965 Higher Education Act.

That's where the modern accreditation process originated, as a gatekeeper for ensuring federal financial aid funds went to institutions that focused on student outcomes. Unfortunately, this has evolved to become a burdensome stamp well beyond traditional academic boundaries, simultaneously demanding an invasive and costly amount of administrative and compliance documentation while failing to provide a meaningful check on institutions that aren't serving students well. The annual cost to the UNC System varies from year to year because of the cycles but it is well into the millions of dollars. This is particularly hard on our smaller, less-resourced universities.

There is little common sense in having our universities accredited by the organizations that oversee for-profit institutions or private colleges that don't have the layers of public accountability. We already have multiple layers, including the state's auditor, budget office, construction office, controller — I can continue through the entire alphabet. There is little common sense in a distant committee attempting a forensic financial analysis of public universities that are independently and transparently monitored by multiple public agencies. And there is little common sense in having closed-door committees impose requirements that bear little relation to the public mission and academic priorities of our universities.

Restoring the notion of true peer review — public institutions assessed by their true peers, in mission and structure — is a core aim of this effort. The Commission for Public Higher Education will be an independent body, just like existing accreditors. But it will be driven by people who understand public institutions, are familiar with the unique mission and obligations of state universities and have the expertise to offer real insight to help drive improvements. It will promote high academic standards to meet the public interest for our students.

Here's what I hope a new approach to accreditation will accomplish:

First, a sharp focus on quality and outcomes — the things that matter to students and the people we serve. Less time cataloging inputs, more time measuring results.

Second, much needed transparency in both process and information sharing. The Commission on Public Higher Education will be much more open and eager to share insight and best practices so that member institutions can improve together.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, a more streamlined process that does not require thousands of hours, millions of dollars, and duplicative documentation from institutions that don't have endless resources. Reducing the compliance burden on smaller campuses is a major driver of this effort and should allow for these public systems to reinvest in the academic core.

Two years ago, the state legislature mandated that our universities change accreditors. This proposal will move through an existing legal process for creating and the federal government recognizing a new accreditor, hopefully culminating in about two years. Our partners have pledged their resources to the effort, and we will commit roughly a quarter million dollars a year in staff time — primarily from detailing our own VP of academic and regulatory affairs Dan Harrison to help lead this project — until the commission is fully supported by member institutions.

Higher education is going to face some enormous challenges in the years to come, with public institutions especially called to address shifting demographics, deep disruptions in the world of work and learning, and the need to maintain trust with a skeptical public. We need an accreditor that understands those challenges and is ready to work with us in meeting them. I'm excited to help build one. This is what reform, national reform of higher education, looks like.