

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
May 23, 2024

It's good for college students to encounter liberal ideas, to become familiar with the best forms of progressive thought our society has to offer. It's good for college students to encounter conservative ideas, to appreciate traditional perspectives and hear strong right-of-center arguments.

And it's vital that college administrators stay out of it altogether, leaving faculty and students free to grapple with competing ideas and pursue truth and discover knowledge with an open mind.

I came to college after growing up in a small town, and some of the best moments of my education asked that I hear different worldviews and consider values that challenged my own. That's the essence of university life, where we all should be, as Van Jones puts it, physically safe but intellectually unsafe. Our public universities are here to serve everyone and ideally, to challenge everyone. That's the job.

And because we're meant to host a wide range of ideas, concepts, and theories — to be an intellectually rich forum for big and difficult questions — our public universities must take a stance of principled neutrality on matters of political controversy. Faculty and students are free to weigh in on all manner of current events and high-profile issues, while university staff must exercise restraint.

No one can speak *for* the whole university community on contentious issues because the university is not of one mind about anything. If you don't believe me, please come spend a day in my office.

One of the main reasons higher education has forfeited so much public confidence over recent decades is the perception that universities are overtly partisan. Demanding campus leaders to take sides on divisive issues — to call for cease fires in foreign lands or denounce fellow citizens here at home — undermines public trust and the spirit of open inquiry that our universities depend on.

Higher education does not exist to settle the most difficult debates in our democracy. Our role is to host those debates, to inform them, to make them richer and more constructive. That's a vital responsibility, and we can't fulfill it if our institutions are seen as partisan actors in one direction or another.

Principled neutrality on the part of university leaders and administrators enhances the free speech rights of students to ask questions, voice opinions, *change* opinions, and of course, peacefully protest. Principled neutrality welcomes all perspectives within the bounds of reasonable student conduct rules, leaving shared space for everyone to be heard. An official university position would hinder free expression and stifle the open-minded contest of ideas that is supposed to mark university life.

Principled neutrality protects the academic freedom of faculty, highlighting their informed views and scholarly expertise precisely because there is no official university position in the classroom or lab. Principled neutrality keeps us aligned with federal laws, state laws, and university policies on equal opportunity and non-discrimination.

And principled neutrality allows us to welcome genuine diversity, which is a plain fact of our society and a great source of strength. Ensuring that everyone is included and supported is core to our mission as a public institution. But it is not the job of the university to decide all the complex and multi-dimensional questions of how to balance and interpret identity. These are vigorously contested ideas in both our democracy and on our campuses.

Non-discrimination, institutional neutrality, free expression, and academic freedom are all mutually reinforcing concepts and values. We are here to serve all, not just those who agree with us. When these principles are faithfully held, they allow diversity in all forms to thrive.

That's because they are fundamentally democratic values, designed to foster freedom and tolerance in a nation with differing visions of progress. It's not an easy time to adhere to those principles. Far too many of us, I believe, have come to view every issue and every controversy solely through a red or blue lens, treating public life as a team sport.

Our public universities must resist that temptation. We are institutionally neutral on political controversies, but that does not mean we are value neutral. It is critical for higher education to recommit to creating conditions for true dialogue, modeling how to build understanding,

empathy, and trust in the search for truth and knowledge. Those are our values. That is our mission.

I've had plenty of those deep and challenging conversations over the past month, hearing thoughtful feedback from people who are skeptical of this approach. I spent time listening to detailed questions and concerns from the Faculty Assembly. I've heard from student body presidents, representatives of the staff, and alumni to hear their views on campus diversity and how we can do a better job on student success and support services.

And I've heard directly from people who worry about the message we might send with any change to our policies. A couple weeks ago, I was in Chapel Hill to speak at the ROTC graduation ceremony, which is a beautiful and patriotic event.

I listened as a Lt. Colonel — a Black female alum of Carolina, there to participate in the commissioning ceremony and share her experience and her example of service to this country — respectfully and publicly voiced her concerns that Black students and staff might feel diminished by the decision to amend the university's diversity policy. She reminded us of the University's long and troubled history with genuine inclusion, and how that resonates to this day, some wounds in this country still quite fresh.

I thanked her afterward and offered my pledge to keep working toward a university that reflects and welcomes the full breadth of actual diversity and life experience in this state. I don't think anyone believes we're at the end of that struggle; I certainly don't. This policy will preserve the University's role as a trusted venue for that vital debate, and for all others. I believe it's what our democratic responsibility demands of us, and I am fully committed to help us realize its aspirations.