

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
November 14, 2024

Higher education is part of the basic infrastructure of this state. Every one of our universities was founded to meet the core needs of North Carolina, to educate the teachers, public safety officers, doctors, engineers, architects and agricultural scientists ready to serve a growing state.

And right now, North Carolina has an urgent need for nurses. Our population is both growing and growing older, and the demands on the nursing profession are intense. The Sheps Center in Chapel Hill is nationally renowned for their health care workforce modeling, and they project a shortage of more than 12,000 nurses in North Carolina over the next decade. There are especially sharp needs in rural areas, where expanding the field of skilled nursing has the potential to address longstanding challenges with access to quality health care.

This is precisely the kind of fundamental need our public universities are here to address. And it's the kind of statewide challenge that a well-coordinated university System is well-suited to tackle. We have 12 schools of nursing across the System, each with different strengths and service priorities, and it's only through a cooperative effort that we're going to meet North Carolina's demand for more nursing care. It's a fantastic opportunity to leverage the strengths of the System for a common cause.

I got to spend a little time last month with the philanthropist Bill Conway. You may know him as a co-founder of the Carlyle Group, one of the largest and most successful investment firms in the world. Over the last several years, Mr. Conway has become a thoughtful and prolific donor to schools of nursing all over the country. The foundation he created with his late wife, Joanne, has given many millions of dollars to help grow nursing programs.

He believes nursing is God's work, and he's right about that. He has also seen the way that high-quality health care careers are a path to upward mobility for families in every part of the country. Nursing is a solid, meaningful job that isn't going to get automated away or moved overseas. We need great nurses in big cities, suburbs, small towns, you name it — there's an opportunity to serve and earn a family-sustaining wage everywhere.

Mr. Conway was in Chapel Hill to celebrate a recent \$5 million gift to UNC-Chapel Hill, and I was grateful for the chance to show him and his staff how committed our state policymakers are to expanding health care access through our public universities. He's already contributed another \$2 million to Western Carolina and I'm quite optimistic that several more of our universities will be considered for similar gifts.

As we heard yesterday in committee, the UNC System Office is deploying \$40 million in grant funding from the legislature to help our schools of nursing expand their programs and welcome more students. Katherine Restrepo Martin of our team is bringing great energy and ideas to that work and the newly created \$23 million Rural Residency Medical Education Training Fund to locate more doctors in underserved areas.

The nursing initiative is being run as a competitive RFP, inviting our very different schools to submit proposals tailored to the specific needs of their program and the opportunities in their region. Some of them are expanding mentoring and tutoring for pre-nursing students; some of them are expanding lab space or clinical placements; most of them are hiring more faculty to teach. And all of them are experimenting with the goal of how to deliver a quality education to more students, so that we can get more talented nurses into the field.

Our goal at the System level isn't just to make an impact through these funds, but to use this grant-making process as an opportunity to learn — to get insight into the strategies that are most effective for tackling the nursing shortage, and to share those findings widely. That's exactly what a public university should be doing — serving the whole state, trying to improve whole fields. That's the coordinated vision.

Sharing the scale of that public investment and corresponding results resonated with Mr. Conway and his team. We've pledged to share what we're learning, and his staff has planned visits to more nursing schools in North Carolina to see firsthand what a sustained, bipartisan commitment to addressing state needs can do. Many longtime members of the Board will remember that we used to hear annual reports about how little was being done to address looming shortages of doctors and nurses. Now, with the legislature's support, we are acting.

I highlight all of this to make a broader point about where our time and effort will stay focused in the years ahead — looking with clear eyes and open minds at how we can serve our fellow citizens, and going about it with diligence, rigor, and humility. You see that happening with health care access; with early childhood literacy; with the repair and renovation of our capital infrastructure; with simplifying and streamlining financial aid, admissions, and transfer policies. I could go on and on, but I'll spare you the full homily.

My point is that we have plenty of meaningful, important, and thoroughly uncontroversial work ahead of us. Because it is lacking an element of conflict, I don't expect much news coverage of the substance or anyone on social media to draw attention and outrage about it. But I'm eager to get to it, and excited about the power of this university to make a difference for North Carolina. That's where we spend our time and resources — helping the people of our state.