

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the Morehead-Cain Scholars in Chapel Hill
January 19, 2024

Thank you for inviting me!

I love the idea of this forum. We need more venues where people get to talk about big ideas in an open and informal setting. That's at the heart of a great education, and the Morehead-Cain Foundation is a great organization to do it. So many distinguished alumni, so much fantastic experience.

I've always admired the Morehead for what it instills. Not just a reward for being smart and hardworking, but a real sense of commitment to Carolina, a duty to lead and serve and give back over a lifetime. I believe powerfully in that obligation for all of us, and I love how Morehead-Cain makes it an explicit part of the program.

You all invited me here to talk about polarization in higher education — the way politics is impacting our universities, and how we should respond to that pressure. I'm going to offer some thoughts and then we will move into the more interesting part of the conversation.

But first, please let me share this. I'm an enormously grateful graduate of this University, a product of wonderful professors and generous mentors and brilliant classmates who I met here, people who changed my life and my thinking in profound ways.

Like some of you, I arrived in Chapel Hill from a small town, from a small public high school, and this place rocked my world in the best way. I have a bone-deep appreciation for public higher education, and for this University in particular, with its centuries-old mission of cultivating young minds and making them ready to serve North Carolina and the wider world.

I've got a few decades on y'all, so I have a little perspective on why polarization has become such a force in our public life, how it's challenging the University's mission, and the role that all of us have in strengthening Carolina's purpose and doing our part to preserve a vibrant, diverse, and thriving American democracy. I'm sure we'll wrap all that up by the end of breakfast!

First, let's talk about the problem we face: **politics has become an identity.**

Politics is important. It's important to me. It's important to all of us because it is how human beings make decisions in a democracy and how we allocate resources. It is with us in every facet of life. But

politics is not at the center of my emotional, spiritual, or vocational life. It's not the dominant lens I use to think about the world, the primary way I organize my social life or assess my friends and colleagues. It doesn't dominate my sense of the world.

For too many people now, partisanship has become a consuming identity — an all-encompassing worldview. It's a tribe to belong to, a sense of meaning, a way to bring simplicity to a complicated and sometimes frustrating world.

You see this hardening of partisan identity reflected in all sorts of different statistics, from the drop in ticket-splitting to more visceral things, like whether parents would be accepting if their child married someone of a different political party. 80% of all marriages are now to people of the same party affiliation.

This intensification of partisan identity has come at the same time that other strong sources of identity — religion, community groups, large extended families living close by — have all been on the decline. People get married later, or not at all. They have fewer kids. They're less likely to go to church. They're less likely to belong to a Rotary Club or a neighborhood association. They change jobs more often. They're more likely to live alone.

And I don't think it's a coincidence at all that the spike in partisanship is coming at the same time as a sharp rise in reports of anxiety and social isolation. It is filling a void.

People now find great meaning in politics. And that *could* be a good thing, if our politics were geared toward a positive, constructive vision of American life. But what we see instead is that both parties are driven less by a vision for the future and more by an apocalyptic vision of what will happen if the other side wins. People aren't *for* their party as much as they're *against* the other party — in opposition to their fellow Americans.

It makes things easier, of course. You don't have to think about a nuanced position on foreign policy or immigration or charter schools — you just hear a caricature of what the other side thinks, and you take a strident position in the opposite direction. It turns the world black and white, makes everything into a contest between good and evil, and ensures you're always on the side of righteousness.

All of which, of course, is deeply destructive to the concept of thoughtful citizenship, or to open-minded, curiosity-driven education.

I am old enough to remember a time not just before the internet and social media, but before news become a 24-hour phenomenon. I remember what a shock to the culture it was when cable news

arrived on the scene, promising to bring updates from all over the world at every hour of the night and day.

Before that, news was a fairly brief, fairly isolated part of most people's day. You read the paper in the morning, maybe watched network news and local tv news at night, and that was about it. *Really* engaged news junkies would read weekly magazines — *Newsweek*, *Time*, *US News*. You got caught up on big events and some commentary, then you went back to the rest of your life.

That all sounds like something out of the stone age now, when people your age are getting news and commentary and controversy more or less continuously — all of it streaming right there onto your phone, a constant barrage of anxiety, tragedy, and outrage.

I can't emphasize enough how *new* this is, and how world-historically strange. Before your generation, nobody in human history has lived with this level of constant awareness about all of the terrible stuff, real and imagined, that's happening in the world all of the time.

There's no question that it's having a warping effect on our politics, and I think a profoundly unhealthy effect on people's minds and souls.

Faced with that kind of information overload, of course people look for simple ways of understanding and processing the world. Partisan identity offers an easy lens to make sense of all the confusing, unsettling, infuriating things you see on the screen. It gives you a simple narrative — good and evil, us vs. them, the righteous against the wicked — so you can keep your bearings in an overwhelming world.

What all of that leads to is a dominance of public discourse by a fairly narrow slice of extremists on either side. Forgive the simplification, but the most intense fifteen percent of people on the left end up shouting back and forth with the most intense fifteen percent of people on the right, and a sea of reasonable or just plain confused people in between them keep their heads down and try not to get caught in the crossfire.

That means we all come away with the impression that our country is full of nothing but rabid partisans, when the reality is that they're just more willing to fill up all the endless content on television, on podcasts, on TikTok or whatever else is driving up your iPhone screen time.

Organizations like More in Common have done some great polling to show that on most big issues, Americans actually take a reasonable, nuanced view — and often agree on a lot more than they realize.

But that kind of patient discussion and compromise doesn't make for a video snippet that can get people to stop scrolling. And misinformation is rampant.

One of the ways this intensified partisanship plays out is in the demands that people make of the big institutions in their lives. There have always been debates about when schools or companies or nonprofits should take a political stand, but the expectation that your university, your employer, your favorite clothing brand should publicly share your view on politics is new.

Politicians and a very vocal subset of the activists on far left and far right are now eager to drag these organizations into partisan fights. Including universities...

So how do we fix it, or at least begin to push toward a healthier political culture? I want to hear your ideas in a moment, but here's my short list of things the University must do to navigate these polarizing pressures.

First and foremost, it's our job to cultivate deep curiosity and a willingness to hold complex, nuanced ideas. In other words, it's our job to *educate* — our first and most important mission.

Staying true to our purpose, our mission is the single most important thing we can do in a polarized era. That isn't easy — there is constant pressure and temptation to take political positions, and there are plenty of people both inside and outside the university who want to see us become a combatant in the culture wars — but remembering our role and sticking to it is the way we keep public trust. It's critical for a public university to maintain public support.

There are some tactical things we've done to try and hold that line. You may have heard about our commitment to institutional neutrality, the idea that university leaders should refrain from taking public positions on highly contentious issues. I think that's hugely important for a public institution that is designed to serve as a forum for open debate and inquiry, a place that has an obligation to serve all North Carolinians, regardless of their political leanings.

That doesn't mean that members of the campus community shouldn't weigh in — faculty and students should speak out on issues that matter to them, especially issues on which they have specific expertise. But people like me — presidents, chancellors, deans and other leaders — have to be careful not to speak on behalf of the whole university. We can't establish a single, approved position on contentious topics. It runs completely counter to academic freedom and free expression.

Along those lines, we've passed a policy against compelled speech, meaning faculty and students shouldn't have to agree with a particular set of political beliefs in order to work here or study here. Back

in the 1950's and 60's, there were a lot of universities that demanded faculty take loyalty oaths pledging they weren't communists. Way back in the 1850's, this university had shameful episodes of demanding that faculty members pledge their loyalty to a white supremacist system, firing faculty members who spoke in favor of abolition.

If academic freedom means anything, it means protecting the rights of faculty members to dissent from prevailing orthodoxy, on campus or off. If free expression means anything, it means protecting students from being told what to say and think. And that's why we passed a policy against compelled speech.

College is supposed to be a time of true intellectual exploration — of testing out new ideas, trying on different arguments and experimenting with different worldviews — so students need the presumption of goodwill when they ask questions or offer perspectives.

It was striking to me that when our own faculty conducted a survey on free expression, it turns out students are often reluctant to share their views not because they fear faculty, but because they're scared of retaliation from their activist peers. That's not a healthy culture, and we need to demand much more room for students to venture ideas, change their minds, and not have to worry that they'll be ostracized.

You can see that every survey out there shows that trust in democracy is falling, confidence among young people in public life is falling, and the basic civic knowledge of most Americans is not especially strong. People are losing the ability to talk to Americans who disagree with them and how to debate hard topics without deepening the divides in our society.

A public university must play a role in addressing that. We're about to propose a new opportunity across the entire university system, giving all students a basic foundation in American democracy as part of their college education. Every student will complete a course that includes core founding documents like the Constitution and the Federalist papers, as well as examples of how the country has struggled to live up to its ideals, with documents like the Gettysburg Address and writings from the Civil Rights movement.

I'd love to require the same of adults but that's a bit beyond my authority!

We're a public university, created by the state legislature, funded by taxpayers, and intricately linked with government agencies, civil society, businesses, nonprofits, and every other sector of our state. The public is going to have some say in how UNC operates — what our priorities are, what our graduates should know, how we should allocate our resources.

Distinguishing between reasonable oversight by our elected officials and improper political influence is a matter of judgment, but we can't simply say that the University should operate autonomously and make all of its own decisions. Our deep ties to the public are a source of strength, and I think our scholarship and the quality of our education is *better* because we're in constant conversation with the broader public.

I'm going to close with a few pieces of advice and then let's move to questions.

First, find deeper sources of meaning than politics.

Politics is important, and you should absolutely be active and informed citizens. But for most people — that is, for just about everyone who isn't a politician or a political staffer — partisan identity should not be at the core of your emotional and spiritual life. You can care deeply about a cause but that's different from having *partisan* identity at the core.

Think hard about the things you really want at the center of your life, the things that give you a sense of identity and security. Is it God, family, service to your community, timeless works of art, a meaningful profession? All of those things are healthier and less transient than waking up every day ready to wage political combat against your fellow citizens.

Second, consume less "news" and open more time for thinking.

We're primed to seek new information, even if that information is not especially valuable. And we have all of these addictive technologies that promise to feed us new tidbits all the time, even if all we're getting is someone's reaction to a column about a Tweet shared via TikTok.

Spend less time consuming, and more time processing and thinking. That's where the hard and valuable stuff happens — when you let your mind wander a bit, when you try to make sense for yourself of what you see and hear and know of the world. Don't let your attention get hijacked by people who profit from conflict. There are a lot of conflict entrepreneurs out there.

And finally, stay curious and reject simple extremes.

The world gets a lot more *interesting* when you take off the partisan blinders and really seek to understand a problem or an issue. Almost everyone who studies *depolarization* — how to get people out of their narrow worldview, how to get people talking across lines of difference — finds that curiosity is a superpower.



You all have that in abundance as Moreheads — curiosity and a drive to learn is what got you here in the first place. Hold onto that. Learn to ask deep questions. Not, “Tell me your position on this and that,” but “tell me how you came to believe what you believe about this and that.” Find the deeper story and the human connection, and then you stop seeing the world in black and white, good and evil, and everything becomes much richer and more colorful.