



UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
April 7, 2022

Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Chancellor. I certainly echo the chair's gratitude for the wonderful visit. I've been almost so inspired by this most recent visit to volunteer my body to forensic science. But I've decided to volunteer Gov. Byers instead. So enjoyed the hospitality, all the work that goes into a big event like this, and the attention to detail has been extraordinary. I don't think we've ever seen signage quite like Western has provided. That will be very difficult to replicate. Extraordinary. Thank you, Chancellor. Appreciate your leadership.

Always great to be in the Whee. You all know I'm a mountain boy, so it doesn't take much to convince me to get back to God's country.

But it isn't just the beautiful scenery, of course, that draws thousands of students to this place every year. It's the core promise of higher education: that if you work hard, you graduate on time, your life will improve in just about every way you can count. You'll know more, you'll earn more, you'll be able to shape your own path in ways that weren't possible otherwise.

It's a compelling pledge, and it's a fact that North Carolina's public colleges do a better job of living up to it than almost any other place in the nation. It's the reason you see so many of our schools, including Western, regularly listed among the best values in higher education; the best places for low-income and first-generation students to vault ahead in life; the best places to return to school for a graduate degree or professional credential.

One of our most important responsibilities at the System level is to keep that promise by adhering to a public interest standard in all of our programs. Simply put, students and families should expect that any good-faith encounter with our institutions will leave them better off than when they started. You've heard me emphasize this point before many times.

The sobering reality is that a lot of programs nationally, particularly when it comes to graduate and professional degrees, don't meet that standard of care. Like a lot of you, I have been closely following the reporting about federal PLUS loans and the excesses of some graduate and professional programs across the country, including some at public universities.

Graduate students represent just over a quarter of federal borrowers but carry more than half of all federal loans. Reporting in the *Wall Street Journal*, research from the think tank *New*

America, and careful analysis by higher education advocates has revealed hundreds of programs that leave their graduates with a great deal of debt and poor prospects for paying it off.

That matters not just for those students directly affected, of course, but for all of us who want to maintain support for higher education and keep the confidence of students and policymakers. Stories about outsized debt may be the exception, and especially so in a low-tuition, high-value system like ours, but they have an outsized impact on public perception of college.

We have a very good story to tell here in North Carolina. Our public universities have some of the best graduate programs in the country, as we saw again last week with the latest round of U.S. News & World Report rankings. In nursing, business, engineering, statistics, medicine, information science — you name the field, UNC System schools are likely near the top of the list in terms of excellence and value.

So our job is to keep it that way. That's why we've revised our program approval standards to take better account of employment prospects and the likely return on investment for students and our state. There's no reason for a publicly subsidized university to run degree programs that don't reliably improve the lives and livelihoods of our students. You've tied compensation, both for me and our chancellors, to metrics like reducing student debt and increasing on-time graduation. And this board has wisely revisited a decades-old funding formula to better emphasize the core responsibility of undergraduate education and to reward performance. Student outcomes.

And, oh, by the way, you may have heard of NC Promise here in Cullowhee (and elsewhere) and how North Carolina is the only state in the nation with six straight years of no tuition increases for in-state undergraduates. Just connecting some of the dots about how all of this ties together.

Now, right now the way many other states fund their universities effectively encourages campuses to create graduate programs that generate revenue, regardless of workforce or public service needs. We need to stay focused on the goals outlined in our strategic plan, like bolstering socio-economic mobility and meeting critical state needs in fields like teaching, allied health, and data science. Right now, our universities are moving the needle.

For a long time, we have taken it for granted that more college is always good advice, and that if people don't understand the payoff of a degree, it's because they're not well-informed about it. But it's plain from the national debt data that some of the frustration towards higher education is not the result of misinformation, but of experience. Public higher education can and should be held to the very highest standard of public service, and I'm proud we're doing all we can to meet that obligation.

So I want to thank the Board for making this a priority. I want to thank the chancellors and their teams for such thoughtful commitment to our shared goals, and to our lawmakers, like Sen. Ballard and Rep. Hardister, and the taxpayers for trusting us with the resources to deliver on the core promise of higher education.

Every time I visit here at Western, I think about what an extraordinary thing it is for our state to create a place like this, a world-class university that doesn't even require a trip down the mountain. Putting high aspirations within reach of all our students, making it possible to strive and achieve close to home – that's about the most important thing we can do.

Thank you. Go Cats!