

President's Report to the UNC Board of Governors January 2021

Welcome to the New Year, which so far is a lot like the old year. But as I've said to all of our faculty and staff these last few weeks, we have reasons for a hopeful start to the spring semester. We have been through some awfully difficult months, and we have several more ahead. But I absolutely believe we're going to end 2021 in a much better place than we're starting, and that'll happen thanks in no small measure to the dedication of the people who work in public higher education.

I'm going to take every opportunity I can to remind people that the vaccines and the treatments that hold so much promise for bringing us back to a more normal life have their roots in research conducted at universities, some of it right here in our state. The infrastructure of higher education — both physical and intellectual — has been crucial in bringing the end of this pandemic into sight.

UNC Health has vaccinated more than 41,000 people so far, and we're moving quickly to open community clinics at campuses across the state. Western Carolina, NC A&T, and UNC Pembroke will be among the first campuses to open public clinics, with other institutions offering vaccines in partnership with local health systems and in accordance with DHHS's priority guidance. This effort is a heavy and complicated lift for our campuses, particularly coming at the same time as they welcome students back. Our chancellors are enthusiastically stepping up. It's a reminder that our campuses are there as a resource for the whole state, and I want to thank all the people within the system who are working overtime to stand up these vaccination sites. We are doing everything in our power to bring this awful pandemic to an end.

And at the same time, we have to continue meeting our core promise to the students and citizens of North Carolina by educating and preparing the next generation. Much like the fall, the start of the spring semester will see different campuses taking different approaches based on the resources and conditions in their own communities. Some will start online; some with a mix of online and in-person learning. All across the state, we're applying the lessons of the fall by testing regularly, keeping classrooms carefully distanced, and stringently enforcing health guidelines.

Most universities were able to keep infections low — in some cases, significantly lower than the surrounding region — through the fall semester. And regardless of whether they transitioned undergraduates fully online or kept a mix of classes, the faculty and staff at our schools did a remarkable job of keeping students on track. Retention has held steady through the toughest academic year I hope any of us will ever see, and that matters a great deal to the future of our state and the people we serve.

To all the students who are keeping focused through tough circumstances, thank you. I know this isn't the year any of you wanted — that any of us wanted — but I'm proud of what so many of you are accomplishing.

One of the most important reasons for the University to maintain vital services through this difficult year is equity — giving all of our students a fair shot at success. We know from decades of research that the students most at risk from disruptions to housing, counseling, and regular coursework are the low-income and minority students who can benefit most from the life-changing opportunities of higher education.

Our mission is to serve the people of North Carolina — *all* the people of North Carolina — and that means putting questions about equity front and center in our decision making. In June, the UNC System launched a Racial Equity Task Force with a mandate to ask hard questions and address long-standing disparities across the University. I encourage everyone in the System to read it. The work of a brighter and more inclusive future belongs to all of us.

The University of the People cannot meet its mission without welcoming, supporting, and celebrating all people. I see many of the recommendations of this report as aligned with our strategic plan's push to improve access and raise graduation rates for underserved students, and to strengthen our HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions.

The stakes of our effort go well beyond the University itself. We are the training ground for North Carolina's next generation of teachers, doctors, business people, tech innovators, and civic leaders. All across our society, people recognize the need for a much fairer distribution of influence and opportunity. If we're going to succeed anywhere, we have to succeed here.

As this task force notes in clear terms, we remain a long way from where we need to be now. But it's also true that the faculty, students, and occasionally the leadership of this University have taken brave stands for racial justice and advanced a righteous cause even in difficult moments. That knowledge ought to inspire us now. We're living through a time of deep distrust in organizations of all kinds, from churches to companies to colleges. There's a lot of skepticism about whether big institutions can be allies in the fight for a better and fairer world. I promise you that this one can be and will be.

Thank you to the members of this task force, and to the many thousands of people across the system who gave good thoughts and goodwill to advance their work.

Finally, I want to spend a minute on the changes we heard about yesterday to the University's program approval process. This doesn't limit any campus's ability to propose new degree programs and there will be many highly relevant ones. We've always evolved to meet new market needs and pursue emerging fields of knowledge. But it does create a more disciplined process for reviewing those proposals. I think a public university has a heightened obligation to ensure that all we do is in service to students, and that we never let institutional needs cloud our commitment to the students' professional and financial wellbeing.

It's right and proper that we ask to hear the public case for each new program we consider. How will it serve the people of North Carolina? How will it leave the students and citizens of this state better off tomorrow than they are today? These sound like straightforward questions, but they get awfully complicated awfully quick. A degree program may be a great fit for one student and a bad bet for another; a new certificate may make eminent sense at one university in a given region but not at four. That's why these things merit closer scrutiny. We must apply a public interest standard to any program that seeks a public university stamp of approval.

I thank the members of this board for their service and their support.