

**Remarks to the North Carolina Conference of Graduate Schools**  
**UNC System President Peter Hans**  
**October 2020**

Thank you all so much for letting me join you today.

I'm Peter Hans, president of the University of North Carolina, and I started in August, which feels like it was about ten years ago in COVID time. I feel certain that a brilliant graduate researcher is going to discover that you age faster during Zoom meetings, so I look forward to that announcement any day.

This has not been an ideal several months for any of us, and I want to begin by acknowledging the truly heroic work that graduate students have been doing alongside our faculty to keep the University running.

That's everything from returning to research labs to keep vital projects on track to figuring out how you migrate thousands of courses online in the span of a few weeks. I have not personally been a TA, but I have held plenty of jobs where "Other Duties as Assigned" was part of the job description. And I can imagine that grad students have played an outsized role in helping many of our more seasoned faculty members figure out the intricacies of Zoom seminars and online teaching software.

And like the rest of us, they've done it while having their own lives and routines upended by the pandemic. I do not for one moment underestimate the sacrifices involved in all of that work.

Graduate education is the seed corn of higher education, and to a huge extent, the seed corn of our economic and social progress. The public and policymakers tend to focus on the undergraduate teaching mission of universities, for obvious and understandable reasons. And you'll certainly hear me talking a lot about access and graduation rates for those students.

But I was drawn to higher education because of the incredible long-range value it brings to our state and our whole society, and I know how much of that value is rooted in our graduate programs.

The doctors and epidemiologists and public health experts who will see us through our present crisis are all products of graduate education. The scientists and researchers who are grappling with the biggest challenge of our age are all products of graduate education. The people helping to plan our cities, rethink our infrastructure, protect our natural resources, reinvent journalism and media — all brilliant products of graduate schools.

It's fairly easy to go out and make the case that scientific progress depends on advanced education. People have a mental image for that — someone in a lab coat, hunched over a countertop full of instruments, running experiments and pushing the boundaries of knowledge. But One thing I hope to do as president is help people understand that graduate-level study touches far more of the world than they realize.

I love the example of library science, because I think a lot of people hear "graduate degree in library science" and just can't imagine how a library can be so complicated. But it's so much bigger than that, of course. It's *information* and library science, and is there any subject in the modern world more fraught, more interesting, more complex and high-stakes than the way people access and understand

information? From social media to machine learning to political polarization and the future of media, information science is an infinitely rich discipline. And North Carolina needs people who understand it on the deepest level.

I will do everything I can to carry that message to our policymakers, to the general public, and to the people who will become your next generation of students.

Because we have some real challenges in graduate education. Stipends aren't what they need to be, and that's been a challenge for a long time. Graduate enrollments are up System-wide this year, which is great, but the picture for international students is not looking promising in the near term. I am working with our federal team to make abundantly clear the immense contributions that international students make to our university and our state, but you all understand quite well where the political and pandemic situations we face.

We'll do everything we can on that front, and I would love to get your ideas and input about how the System Office can help strengthen the overall brand of UNC graduate education beyond our borders.

I also think the System Office can a play role in taking some of the practices graduate schools have pioneered, especially around serving mid-career professionals and other adult learners, and spread them to the rest of the enterprise. That's a particular focus of mine.

One of the great challenges we have in North Carolina is a whole lot of people who need further education — both at the graduate and undergraduate level — but have complicated, demanding lives that make a traditional program impossible. In so many ways, it's our graduate programs that have been most innovative in serving that kind of student. We need to make sure your experience and insight is shared widely with your colleagues across campus.

There's a lot more we can talk about, but the last thing I'll say is how much I look forward to getting out and meeting you and your students, whenever we're able to conduct those visits safely. So much of the joy of University life comes from spending time with people creating new knowledge, pursuing truth and discovery wherever it leads them, and I know that work is happening in your programs every day. I really can't wait to see more of it firsthand.

In the meantime, deepest thanks for all that you're doing to steer this great university through one its toughest moments. This has been a season of hardship in so many ways, but it has also been a clarifying moment about the incalculable value of higher education, the absolute necessity of supporting smart people who are ready to step up when the world needs them. That's you, and I couldn't be more grateful to work alongside you.