THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM

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Like a few of you in this room, I am old enough to remember the excitement, the trepidation, the sense of nervous uncertainty that accompanied the internet's explosion into public life 30 years ago.

The incredibly rapid adoption of artificial intelligence tools has created a similar moment for higher education. Now that nearly every student in America has access to AI models that can hold a conversation, produce a credible essay, pass the bar exam, and parse vast quantities of data for patterns and insight, we're being faced with some fundamental questions about what it all means for the work of higher education. This goes far beyond concerns about how you guard the integrity of student work, important as that is, and gets right to the heart of what skills and mental disciplines we want our students to have; what forms of information and knowledge we expect our scholars to create; and how we're going to manage, as an enterprise, the risks and possibilities of an even more automated world.

I am not going to sit here today and make confident predictions about how all of this is going to play out. Much of the early prognosticating about the Internet has not aged well. The bright-eyed futurists who thought the internet would usher us to an end-of-history paradise were wrong; the pessimists who thought the internet would be a death blow to universities were also wrong. I suspect the AI story will play out in a similar muddle somewhere between utopia and annihilation.

Instead of making grand predictions, please let me share with you some of the things I'm excited about with AI; some of the things I'm worried about with AI; and what we as a university system are doing about it.

I am excited about the potential for artificial intelligence to accelerate discovery, especially in science and health care. In everything from flood modeling to disease detection to energy efficiency, AI tools hold great promise for an age of rapid advancement in our ability to find signals in the noise and make progress on important challenges. North Carolina A&T has a project funded by the Department of Defense to test the safety and reliability of different AI systems; UNC Charlotte is creating AI-powered "digital twins" to map people's health markers and test new treatments; and NC State is already training ag extension agents in the latest AI-powered crop science, so they can put these tools in the hands of farmers. We're finding new examples like this every day across the state, and that's especially important for North Carolina's research-intensive economy.

I am excited about the potential of AI as an educational tool, offering students new opportunities for research, direct feedback, and creative collaboration. Faculty across the System are finding some very compelling ways to use AI to advance their teaching. At UNC Asheville, students are using AI to turn lecture notes into podcasts, giving them a new way to study. At ECU, there's a professor assigning students to teach things to ChatGPT, having it play the role of an eager protege so students can demonstrate their mastery of a topic. A business professor at Winston-Salem State is using AI prompts to examine ethics case studies in a more interactive way. That's just the tip of the iceberg, with more uses emerging every day. For a creative instructor and a motivated group of students, AI can be an extraordinary learning tool.

I'm also excited about the potential for AI tools to improve our day-to-day operations. There's an opportunity to get more efficient at everything from space allocation to payment processing, to provide a better experience to our students when it comes to enrollment, course registration, class scheduling, financial aid, parking — anything that involves navigating campus bureaucracy. Every large enterprise in the world is looking for similar operational gains, and we're being strategic about doing the same.

For all the very real possibilities for progress, there's also good reason to be concerned about the impact of artificial intelligence on some of our core responsibilities in higher education.

The same tools that promise to advance our understanding of the world also threaten to overwhelm our ability to find true knowledge in a sea of questionable information. Even before robots could generate vast quantities of text and data, universities were struggling with how to properly organize, archive, and vet the explosion of content in the digital era. The deepest purpose of a university is to seek truth — to pursue real understanding of the world through structured, time-tested means of sifting information into knowledge, and knowledge into something like wisdom. That's the role of scientists and scholars, of academic disciplines and research libraries. We are supposed to create and teach knowledge that stands the test of time. Truth is always a lofty challenge, under threat from ideology, from ignorance, from all the different flavors of human failure to see the world clearly. AI tools may help us address some of those shortcomings; they may also overwhelm us with nonsense.

I worry, too, that for every promise AI holds for teaching and learning, it poses an equal threat to motivation and mental effort. Perhaps you have already heard the term "cognitive offloading," or the tendency to hand over difficult thinking to a chatbot that is perfectly willing to do your reading, brainstorming, and drafting for you. It's one thing to make use of an AI tool when you've already had years of experience honing your mind and your work ethic. But having access to a mental shortcut from your earliest days as a student — an easy button you can press any time things get tough — is a tempting invitation to mediocrity. You don't write papers in college because the world needs more papers; you write papers in college so that you get better at thinking and understanding. As the one writer put it, using ChatGPT to complete all your assignments is like bringing a forklift to the gym. You've missed the point of the gym.

Finally, I worry a great deal about the potential of AI to accelerate an alarming slide into isolation and anxiety for our young people. There are too many souls retreating into digital distractions at the expense of real human connection, and the early trends of using AI chatbots for all-purpose companionship and emotional support are worrisome. College is not just a place for imparting knowledge; it's a wellspring of social connection, a well-honed environment for meeting new people, navigating public life, forging the kind of deep relationships that bring us joy and carry us through hard moments. None of that can happen if your head is buried in screens for much of the day and night. AI could provide yet another trap where you can retreat into the cold glow of the virtual world instead of seeking to interact with the natural world all around us.

On every one of our campuses, there are brilliant people thinking hard about these possibilities and risks. And we're eager to support them at the System level.

That starts with giving our faculty and staff the room and the resources to do what they've always done — explore, experiment, and figure out how this new frontier in technology will affect our mission. So much of the discussion about higher education and AI has framed this moment as a mad scramble to respond to an existential threat, but that's not the way I've seen it unfold on our campuses.

University scholars and researchers have been intimately involved in the development of AI; in the testing and application of AI; in the big debates about the social, ethical, economic, and philosophical implications of AI. And right now, on every one of our campuses, professors and students and staff are figuring out where it makes sense to embrace artificial intelligence and where we need to carefully safeguard human intelligence, which will always remain at the core of what we do.

For the past three years, the UNC System has hosted a broad faculty working group devoted to learning technology, and they have been on top of the advances in AI. They've already developed initiatives around assessment and grading, around the value of traditional credentials in an AI world, around academic integrity, and around AI's role in research collaboration. I cannot stress enough that the response across the System has been broad, organic, and very much in keeping with the spirit of inquiry and experimentation that we expect university scholars to bring to their work. As of this week, we now have three degree programs and eight minors or concentrations with a focus on AI, and that number will certainly grow.

A new Higher Education Horizons Group will help us think through some of these longer-term trends — not just our immediate needs around AI tools or training, but around some of the bigger questions of how technologies that can generate text and art and movies and images, computational models that some people believe constitute a new form of thinking, may impact

what we do in higher education. AI is here and we must be alert to its opportunities and challenges.

There are several clear roles for the UNC System as we move forward:

1.) First, we need to provide resources. Through the great work of our System Office team, we are moving toward very favorable licensing agreements with many of the major AI providers — Amazon, OpenAI, Google, and Microsoft — to make sure that our faculty, staff, and students will have access to the most advanced versions of these tools. Our agreement with Google, for example, makes us one of the first university systems in the country to provide thousands of career certificates to allow our students and staff to hone their AI credentials. The goal here isn't to pick a winner in the AI race or to tie our university to a particular model or approach. It's to ensure that people across the UNC System have access to the very best of what's available in this space, so that we can freely experiment and adapt.

2.) Second, we need to coordinate and share best practices across the System. We'll be hiring a Chief AI Officer to help us oversee AI strategy for the System and aid our campuses with their own integration. We already host a biannual Learning and Technology Symposium, with its own publications and trainings, and AI is now a core component of that work. We're forming a new AI Advisory Council with experts and practitioners across the System to help us identify needs, find and highlight productive uses of AI across the System, and ensure that we're sharing knowledge across our institutions. As with any fast-changing technology, the smartest use cases won't be delivered top-down but will emerge bottom-up from the efforts happening on our campuses.

3.) Finally, we need to keep our universities connected with the emerging needs of our state, working closely with industry partners to help students prepare for a shifting job market. Higher education has always evolved in response to new demands in the economy, and our campuses are doing a lot to address the demand for AI skills through new programs, new degree offerings, and new trainings. But there are already indications that AI is eroding entry-level jobs in fields like computer programming, with more on the way. We have an obligation to deliver the most relevant, most valuable degree possible for our students, and that means closely monitoring the way emerging technology is changing our economy and our society. To power our state's workforce for the future, we are launching by the beginning of the new year a Systemwide AI skills

module that will be accessible to every student across the UNC System. This module will harness the expertise of our own world-class faculty and the innovation of leading private sector partners. Soon thereafter, I hope to make that ever-evolving content broadly available to the people of North Carolina as well.

Education is a very old calling, and universities are some of the most enduring institutions in American society. I do not believe that AI is going to spell the end of college, any more than printed books, television, the internet, or any other innovation that has promised to upend the very humane process of learning. Whatever tasks the chatbots and algorithms manage to master, there will still be good and vital work for us in taking unformed thinkers and making them sharper, more reflective, more richly relational human beings. There will still be a place for classrooms, for quads, for professors and mentors — for time and space to think and read and ask and argue, for the drive to understand and make meaning of the world.

The rise of the internet changed human life for the better — and for the worse. I suspect AI will be a similar phenomenon, good and bad, and part of our job in higher education is to hold the torch for flourishing of the human spirit no matter what takes hold. We've seen the real dangers of people losing themselves in a very online world of constant exposure to relentless images and ideology. But noise is not knowledge. And technology itself is not necessarily truth. If anything, the emergence of hyper-efficient information machines may deepen the case for college as a fundamentally humanistic endeavor — a place where we strive to be more fully alive to the world, indeed more fully human. We cannot outsource life to artificial intelligence. It must be accompanied by emotional intelligence, reasoning, morality, and empathy. There is much to do and much more to follow in the days ahead.