

Speech to the NC Community College System Conference Feb. 15, 2021

I had the honor and privilege of serving as the President of the North Carolina Community Colleges before completing my own transfer pathway to the UNC System back in August. That feels like it was about ten years ago. I heard someone say that in pandemic time, the days somehow go slower than the months, and that seems about right.

I know all of you have been doing some extraordinary work during this season of hardship to keep students on track, and you've been doing it even amid huge disruptions to your own lives. When the history of this era is written, I think people will be in awe of the teachers, the counselors, and the administrators who made good things happen against impossible odds. So thank you, enormously. I have confidence that we're going to end 2021 in much better shape than we started it.

For starters, you have a fantastic new president in Thomas Stith, who I have known for many years. Thomas is a very capable leader, a good man, and someone who absolutely knows what our community colleges mean to this state. I'm thrilled we'll be working and partnering together.

This morning, I want to tell you a little about some of the shared projects we're working on between the university and the community colleges, and then I want to make the modest case that community colleges are the one institution that can save America. I promise that'll take less than the twenty minutes they've put on the schedule, so we'll have plenty of time for questions and comments.

Many North Carolinians don't know that we have different systems for our community colleges and universities, and I don't think they should. In an ideal world, every person across this state would just know they have great options for education beyond high school and a straightforward way to make it happen.

We're a long way from that ideal, but there are some exciting things in the works.

We're weighing big ideas for reforming state-based financial aid over the next few years, and one of the key aims of that effort is to make sure the state's scholarship dollars are truly encouraging students' aspirations. Financial aid has the greatest impact when students know about it early, when they understand how it will affect their overall costs, and when they know that it's intended for people like them. It's wonderful to help students who were already heading to college, but even better when you can use scholarship dollars to encourage someone who isn't sure about their path beyond high school. If we can make the existing state grant program easier to understand and make sure it's shared with prospective students earlier, I think we can make a dent in some of the cost anxiety and debt that leads students to second guess their plans for college.

We're also working very hard to improve the transfer pathway from community colleges to the University System. There is such a deep well of talent in our community colleges. And — from the university perspective — we don't do nearly enough to recruit and encourage those students to consider a four-year degree. It's not just about removing bureaucratic barriers — things like common course numbering and automatic credit transfer. It's also about proactive outreach, about actively recruiting and encouraging students *we know* can be successful. Transfer students actually

do *better* than their peers when they enroll in four-year universities, because they've already proven they can handle the work. We have years of data to show that transfer students with an associate degree succeed at higher rates in their classes and graduate at higher rates than peers who came in through the traditional route.

And if I can editorialize a moment, I think transfer students often bring a much-needed dose of reality and life experience to our four-year campuses. Classroom discussions are richer and more interesting, research ideas are stronger, and lab innovations are more likely when you've got people with some life experience in the mix. Which is all to say, I think welcoming a lot more transfer students isn't just about offering more opportunity to those students, but about improving the overall quality of our universities. *All* of our students will get a better education if we strengthen transfer pathways.

There's also no way for North Carolina to meet its broader goals around educational attainment unless we get serious about transfer students. I will be relentless on this issue as University President, and I'm thrilled to be working with all of you to achieve real progress.

Common Course Numbering is a huge step in the right direction, and I applaud the many, many people are putting in many, many hours of difficult work to make that happen. I remember when we were first kicking off that effort after I arrived, and a member of the faculty at one of our universities turned to me and said, "Do you have any idea how complicated this is going to be?" And I had to resist the urge to say, "Yes, and do you have any idea how complicated it is *right now* for our students?"

It was a good reminder that those of us in administration need to tackle the hard stuff so that students don't have to. I want our students to work hard in the classroom. There's nothing wrong with a little productive struggle to master calculus or chemistry or American history. But there is absolutely nothing productive about a student struggling to untangle a course articulation agreement. That's on us.

I've devoted a lot of my time over the last few years, both in my prior role at the community colleges and now with the university, to supporting MyFutureNC and the statewide goal of seeing 2 million more North Carolinians with a degree or valuable credential by 2030. Reducing administrative burdens on students is the low-hanging fruit of that effort, and we owe our state an all-out effort to get rid of any bureaucratic barrier that's holding our students back from learning new skills and earning new credentials.

We all know what an enormously valuable education our community colleges offer. And if we make that high-value opportunity harder to access, we inadvertently push students into bad choices. During the last recession, far too many students who went looking for a real education and were instead deceived by a certain number of for-profit schools. There are good actors in that space who make us more agile. But right here in North Carolina, thousands of students who needed our help were left to cope with the fallout from schools that borrowed the credibility of college but offered little of the value.

That hurt our students and our state. Those were North Carolinians who should have been served by the community colleges and by UNC System schools that deliver on their promises.

When those of us in the public and nonprofit sectors fail to provide simple, compelling options for working adults or students on the margins, we leave the field wide open for bad actors. When we fail to change our programs to meet the changing needs of our citizens, we contribute to widening inequality.

When we make a real education hard to access while less reputable alternatives take nothing more than a toll-free phone call, we leave behind the very people who need us the most.

Because making higher education work for more students — for people in rural regions, people in the middle of their careers, people who may have already tried college and found it wasn't right for them the first time — it's about more than just economic opportunity. Broadening our vision of who college is for, who our institutions of higher education are meant to serve, is about the health of our state and our country in the deepest sense. It's about bridging the political and social divides that have eroded our sense of community and made our public life so discouraging over the last several years.

I am troubled, as I know many of you are, by the sharp divisions that are emerging in our country. And I am especially troubled that so many of them seem to break along educational lines. Too many Americans without a college degree, heavily concentrated in rural regions, feel a deep sense of alienation not just from colleges and universities but from government, from media, from big institutions of all kinds. They don't trust the institutions of society to take their interests seriously or respect their voices. All across society, confidence in major institutions has been declining for the better part of a generation. And too many Americans *with* a college degree don't seem to recognize that reality, don't seem to understand the sense of distance their fellow citizens feel from cultural and economic opportunity.

The Nobel-winning economist Angus Deaton and his wife Anne Case, most famous for their work on declining life expectancy and “deaths of despair” in the United States, published a book last year just before the pandemic about the root causes of declining social trust and overall wellbeing for some Americans. To their own surprise, they found the disparities around college opportunity to be one of the most destructive forces in American life.

“The sharp bachelor's degree cutoff in America is divisive and unproductive,” they argued. “The K-12 education system is largely designed to prepare people to go to college, although only a third succeed in doing so, something that is both wasteful and unjust. Those who do not make it risk being branded as failures and left feeling either that they themselves are at fault, or that the system is rigged, or both.”

That hurts my heart. In other words, our work isn't just about building a stronger workforce or preparing people for the jobs of the future. It's about building a country that can hold together, forging a political system that speaks to the needs of *all* Americans, not just those with four-year diplomas.

Now listen — I'm a university president. I was a community college president before that, and even earlier, a member of state governing boards for 18 years. I've spent my entire adult life supporting and serving public higher education. I absolutely think more people deserve the opportunity to go to college, and that we need to make it much easier for students of all backgrounds to achieve higher levels of education.

But I also believe there must be more than one path to success and respect in American life. No matter how well we do in welcoming more people into our colleges and universities, it will still be true for a long time that the majority of Americans don't hold a college degree. We can't survive as a functioning country if so many of our fellow citizens feel disrespected or shut out.

Economists are already talking about the “K-shaped” recovery that’s emerging after the huge economic downturn last spring. Jobs for those with college degrees have recovered and even grown, while employment for those without a college degree remains far below what it was. Wages and wealth for white-collar workers actually increased through the pandemic, even as millions of working-class Americans saw their jobs vanish and their safety net collapse.

In the next few years, we are going to face *intense* challenges as a country in helping millions of people find new careers and a renewed sense of purpose. We learned from the Great Recession that being out of the workforce for prolonged periods of time, as so many people have been through the coronavirus pandemic, is devastating not just economically, but for health and long-term wellbeing. The longer someone remains unemployed, the less likely they are to find that connection again.

We can’t afford to have a K-shaped recovery, with some people rising as others fall, and I don’t think we can sustain a K-shaped democracy. We simply must have governing institutions and engines of mobility that are designed for *all* Americans, that recognize the complex challenges of people’s lives.

That’s where you come in.

I am convinced that community colleges can be bridging institutions, places that hold our state and our people together at a time when so many other forces are pulling them apart. It’s right there in the name — colleges that are *of* the community, *for* the community — firmly rooted in the needs and interests of a particular place. In a time of so much disruption and change, we desperately need more institutions that build a strong sense of local and regional identity, that bring pride and energy to the places they call home.

Just think about the language people use to describe traditional, four-year universities. You *go off* to college, expand your horizons, learn the campus culture. There’s huge value in all of that. Traveling the distance from Horse Shoe in the mountains to Chapel Hill changed my life, and I want more North Carolinians to have the opportunity for that kind of transformative experience.

But I also know how alien and unappealing that can sound if what you’re looking for isn’t a whole new life or a whole new culture, but simply more opportunity. More knowledge. The chance to pursue a new career in a place you love. People deserve a chance to do those things without feeling like they have to leave behind the communities and people they care about. Without having to go someplace that feels culturally and economically apart from the world they know.

That’s why I see community colleges as a vital bridge. Places that lower the barriers to ambition, places that welcome higher aspirations without demanding that people uproot their whole lives. Places that bring higher education out of the ivory tower and into the daily lives of those who need it most.

I recently read an essay where the author was talking about how we build narratives for our own lives, how we need a version of our own story that makes sense. “We tell ourselves stories to live,” she wrote. “We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices.”

That, to me, is the brilliant role that community colleges play in the lives of so many students. They offer a version of the story that feels both exciting and reachable. You prompt people to take that first step

toward something bigger and better — that first, terrifying step of reaching for new goals and writing a new story for their lives.

That's huge, because the first step is the hardest and the most important. Get someone to take that first step, and they'll take others. Show them that a daydream can become real, and they'll dream again. Make the first connection, and others will follow.

That's the power of a bridging institution, a place that people can trust with their highest hopes and greatest needs. That trust may be the most precious commodity in our country right now. What you do with it — what we *all* do to earn and honor the trust of our fellow North Carolinians — will define the kind of state we're destined to become.

Will we figure out how to move together, how to bridge the gaps that have grown between us and reclaim a shared vision of the future? I honestly believe those of you gathered here will do more to answer that question than any other group in North Carolina. And that gives me enormous hope for the years ahead.

Thank you all so much. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and questions.