

Speech to the NC Legislative Black Caucus Foundation Scholarship Event
UNC System President Peter Hans
October 13, 2020

Good evening. And thank you so much for welcoming me. I am looking forward to the day when we can all raise a cocktail glass together in person again.

I'm Peter Hans, President of the University of North Carolina, and I started in August, which feels like it was several years ago.

As a first-generation college student from rural North Carolina, I'm a product of our university system. Because of what having access to college meant for me in my life, I've long held a deep appreciation for the opportunities that our state's system of public higher education – both our universities and our community colleges – offer to all North Carolinians. During my time serving on the UNC Board of Governors, with Senator Robinson, and also while serving as the President of the Community College System, I've seen the impact of the great work that our five HBCUs have on our students, our communities, and our state.

There are more Black undergraduates studying in HBCUs in North Carolina than in any other state, and that is an enormous strength for our economy and our society. It's also a testament to the strong leadership of our HBCU campuses, in particular my friend and colleague Chancellor Harold Martin who is leading NC A&T, the largest HBCU in the country. I'm looking forward to hearing his remarks, so I'll keep mine brief.

Let me take a moment to thank you all for your support of our campuses. Thanks to those of you who serve now and have served in the past in the General Assembly -- you've been champions for funding our university and as a result, we've been able to keep our tuition affordable while increasing access and quality. And, thanks to all of you involved in the Foundation, we have recipients of the Wainwright Scholarship on our campuses right now studying nursing, information technology, chemical engineering, and political science. You are nurturing the next generation of talent and leadership that we need in a state that's growing — and growing more diverse.

One of the most heartening trends in higher education over the last several years has been an increased focus on socio-economic mobility — on how effectively a college education helps students achieve a higher standard of living. For too long, schools have been judged mostly on inputs — the test scores and GPAs of students before they've even come in the door — and not enough on outputs, what they actually do for their students once they're enrolled.

It will come as a surprise to no one in this Zoom room that when you start looking at more substantive metrics like economic mobility, HBCUs punch above their weight. Places like A&T, Winston-Salem State, Elizabeth City State, Fayetteville State, and NC Central are far more likely to vault students from struggling families into the middle class than many of their peers. They've been doing that vital work for generations — despite being under-valued for nearly as long.

One of my core priorities as president — one of the metrics I'll be judged on by my board — is making sure that generational progress continues by keeping tuition in check and addressing the sharp burden of student debt. An education enhances mobility, but educational debt can limit it. There is no doubt in

my mind that improving racial equity in this country will depend in part on narrowing the wealth gap. And that means addressing the opportunity gap -- the disproportionate share of student debt carried by Black college graduates, something I know this group has focused on for a long time.

All of us in higher education could stand to learn a few credits from our HBCUs. We need to learn from their approach to teaching, to supporting students in creative and compassionate ways, and especially their strength in building a vibrant and supportive campus community. These lessons are relevant for all our UNC system schools as we strive to improve student outcomes no matter which campus our students are attending.

Inside Higher Ed ran an article a couple weeks ago about the remarkable job HBCUs have done in protecting their students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they highlighted North Carolina, including Chancellor Martin and Chancellor Karrie Dixon, who is doing an amazing job leading Elizabeth City State University. The sense of community and shared purpose on HBCU campuses has encouraged students to follow COVID guidelines, and it has given campus leaders the confidence to move forward with in-person learning. We all have a heightened responsibility to one another during this public health crisis, and our HBCUs are demonstrating what that actually looks like in practice.

As we've been tracking COVID data this semester across the UNC system, we've been impressed by the low number of cases and the high level of student compliance with protective behavior like the 3Ws and limiting social gatherings at all of our HBCUs. I was speaking with Harold just yesterday about conditions on his campus, and his continued leadership and strong messaging to his students to remain vigilant in protecting themselves and others gives me confidence that we will continue to see success. And I'll be there to support them.

It's just one of many ways that HBCUs have shown leadership in these trying times. Many of the social movements that have moved our country forward were born on HBCU campuses, including right here in North Carolina. Those students had the courage and the civic faith to fight for a better and truer America. I see that same energy in a generation of students today, and I'm heartened by it.

Thank you all for everything that you're doing to support that next generation of students, and please know that my door is always open to you and for you.

With that, it's my great pleasure to present the man who leads the largest HBCU in the country, the brilliant embodiment of Aggie Pride, Dr. Harold Martin, Chancellor of North Carolina A&T State University...