

State of the University Address: Fayetteville

UNC System President Margaret Spellings

April 9, 2018

Thank you, Chancellor Anderson, for that introduction and for your leadership here at FSU.

We're joined this morning by a number of local and state leaders, including members of UNC's Board of Governors.

Thank you for your leadership. The strength of this University System is a result of the focus and vision from our Board, enabling our institutions to rise to the higher expectations we've set.

We also have members of the Legislature here, members of the FSU Board of Trustees and leaders from this institution and others across the state. Thank you all for being here.

I also want to recognize and thank our two co-sponsors, the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce and the Fayetteville Business and Professional League. We'll hear from Chamber President Christine Michaels later on.

Today, we're here for a progress report, a reflection on the state of our great university.

North Carolina has built, without question, one of the finest university systems in the nation. And it's getting better every day.

We've raised our graduation rate more than six percentage points in the last five years. That improvement means more than 2,000 students have earned a degree this year — 2,000 more lives filled with greater opportunity, 2,000 families made more secure.

We've increased our annual research funding by more than \$300 million since 2012. And now, the UNC System nets one and a half billion dollars in research investments every single year.

We're filling jobs in vital fields, producing nearly 21,000 graduates each year with degrees and certificates in health sciences, engineering, and STEM, an increase of 29 percent since 2011.

We're graduating nearly 20 percent more Pell-eligible students each year than we did in 2011, upholding our commitment to access and opportunity.

And thanks to the legislature's commitment, tuition for North Carolinians is flat or falling at every one of our institutions.

In these critical measures, we are getting stronger. But that's no cause for complacency. As I like to say, we're pleased but not satisfied.

The question before us now is how we uphold our core mission in a rapidly changing world. How does higher education once again rise to meet our world's rising challenges and opportunities?

North Carolina is the place where we can — where we must — answer that charge. Our state mirrors the most significant trends affecting the country — passionate politics, shifting demographics, and an economy growing well, but unevenly.

We have, as UNC President Bill Friday famously said, a “mighty engine” for shaping these forces. And over the years, its power and potential has come from its willingness to adapt and reinvent itself.

Land grant universities expanded our idea of “all useful learning,” as established in UNC’s original charter, and recognized higher education’s essential role in a modern economy.

Campuses were transformed once again when the GI Bill expanded our vision of college, ushering in a broader middle class.

And the struggle for civil rights established the opportunity to learn and achieve as the birthright of all Americans.

Today, we face another moment of reinvention, a moment that holds more opportunity than downside if we embrace our legacy of change and set higher expectations for ourselves.

We have a new type of student who sees higher education as an option, we have new ways of teaching and engaging our students to revolutionize learning, we have new technology that can increase access and drive success.

Guided by the emerging needs of our state, and the ambitious Strategic Plan the Board of Governors unanimously adopted just over a year ago, the UNC System is focused on the shared concerns that higher education has the power to address.

And as we move ahead, I see three big issues that both keep me up at night, as we say, but also giving me confidence in the importance of our mission.

Mobility

The first issue is economic mobility — to me, the defining issue of our time.

The American Dream holds that talent and hard work lead to a better life.

When that belief begins to fray, we all suffer. Our politics become more troubled, and we fail to tap the talent we need to thrive and survive.

Our region — from Southern Virginia to Mississippi — is struggling with mobility. Children born into poverty in the South have strikingly low odds of bettering their lives.

In North Carolina, our metro areas rank among the worst in the nation for upward mobility and Fayetteville and Cumberland County is no exception. Both stand as one of the least upwardly mobile areas in America.

But we have a proven route to change that through higher education. National data from the Equality of Opportunity Project confirms that public universities, especially highly accessible institutions like FSU, do remarkable work in lifting low-income students to a better life.

When we meet our core mission — reaching talented students from all backgrounds, getting them in the door, and helping them graduate — college changes lives, lifts families, and transforms communities.

Improving economic mobility is an access issue. Earning a place here must not depend on the color of your skin, the income of your family, or the zip code where you grew up.

It's also a student success issue. Your odds of graduating should depend on work ethic and academic performance, not your parents' resources.

And it's a community impact issue. The jobs created by our alumni, the healthcare provided by our hospitals and medical graduates, the new industries developed by our researchers — they improve the quality of life for everyone, not just those who study here.

That is our obligation as the People's University — to think beyond those who earn a diploma. We're here to serve all North Carolinians, not just those who enroll. And part of that means we must welcome and support alternative paths to opportunity.

I'm not a believer in college-for-all, and I don't know any university president who is. But I am a believer in education and training beyond high school for nearly everyone, whether that's in school, on the job, or through military service.

We are steadily losing good jobs for high school graduates and gaining work that requires more education. Our universities must support apprenticeship programs, grant credit for military service, and partner with employers to offer on-the-job training that counts toward a degree or a certificate.

We must broaden options because the students we serve today are far more diverse than those we served a quarter-century ago. Any vision that's overly focused on that 18-year-old coming straight from high school won't cut it anymore.

Fayetteville State University is leading the way in serving today's new student. Nearly half of FSU's student body is over the age of 24. Nearly a quarter are military-affiliated students. More than two-thirds are students of color.

In a state with more than a million adults who have some higher education but no degree, the highest per-capita military population in the nation, and a majority-minority under-10 population, that's the kind of student population that we must serve in order to truly provide upward mobility and opportunity for every North Carolinian.

And to do so across the System – to educate more students, from more varied backgrounds, in more affordable, convenient ways than ever before – we must take a hard look at our state's full educational continuum.

That's why we've formed the My Future NC Commission.

North Carolina is one of just five states without a statewide goal for how many people must have education beyond high school. I'm glad this state is an outlier in discussions of affordability and quality.

But being one of the few states without an attainment goal – that's not the kind of outlier we want to be.

Right now, we simply aren't well-coordinated in how we serve North Carolinians from pre-K to college to the workforce. We don't have well-defined, clearly marked pathways to help people achieve their dreams. My Future NC will give us a goal for how many North Carolinians must have goal and recommendations for how to get there.

Supporting that effort will mean we in the university must do our part to better prepare K-12 teachers so all students are ready for the next step when they graduate from high school.

Improving teacher preparation in North Carolina is a personal priority for me, and the focus of a recent report that we released.

It will also mean we must work better with other higher education systems, most notably by improving our community colleges partnerships.

When we do a better job of transferring students between institutions, it improves retention and graduation, drives opportunity, and builds a college-going culture for all North Carolinians.

Again, FSU is leading the way. More than 56 percent of its students have transferred in from another institution. That's the kind of accessibility that allows this institution to serve a truly diverse population and serve as a catalyst for opportunity and upward mobility.

Underscoring the entire discussion of economic mobility is the escalating cost of college. Opportunity is meaningless if you can't afford it.

Happily, North Carolina remains a national leader on college costs. Stronger-than-average taxpayer support — providing a remarkable two-thirds of our instructional costs — keeps our tuition among the lowest in the country.

And Fayetteville State University is helping lead the System with the second lowest total cost of attendance — including books, tuition and room and board — at just \$15,000 a year.

That low cost is crucial, because our students aren't comparing our price tag to a carefully selected group of our peers. They're comparing us to their savings accounts and paychecks, neither of which have kept up with the tuition hikes over the past two decades.

That's why, through the leadership of the General Assembly, the UNC Board of Governors, and our institution's Trustees and Chancellors, we've put a lid on tuition.

The UNC System's strategic plan holds tuition to the pace of income growth in our state. And we've required flat tuition for students who remain enrolled and on-track for graduation, another great incentive for them to stay and complete.

Most remarkably, thanks to a bold investment from the General Assembly, the NC Promise initiative has dropped tuition to just \$500 per semester at UNC Pembroke, Western Carolina University, and Elizabeth City State University, fulfilling our Constitutional mandate to be as free as practicable.

All of that represents real and meaningful progress. We're working with our community college, K-12 and business partners, we're adapting to educate non-traditional students, and we're keeping costs low.

But to make higher education a more reliable path to opportunity for all North Carolinians, we must do more to get more students in and across the finish line to graduation.

That means a simpler, fairer approach to financial aid — targeting help where it's needed most.

As national policymakers work to streamline federal aid, we have work to do here in North Carolina as well.

There's broad support for summer school funding, for example, giving students flexibility to manage course loads and improving on-time graduation. And everyone agrees we must tell

students and families financial aid information earlier – in high school – so they see that the true cost of college is often less than they might imagine.

For an institution like FSU, which is excelling at serving a diverse population and being broadly accessible, financial aid represents a powerful way to help ensure those students succeed and graduate.

Our nation’s most important pathway to opportunity must become less of a high-stakes gamble for our most vulnerable students, and financial aid is the most effective tool we have.

Accountability

I’ve just run through a wide range of worthwhile work to give North Carolinians a better shot at the American Dream. But none of it matters if we don’t execute and hold ourselves accountable for doing so.

Which is why our second key issue is accountability.

Higher education has suffered from a ‘send us the money and leave us alone’ kind of attitude. What we do is legitimately hard to measure, and many of the benefits we bring to both individuals and the broader society take a long time to mature. So, we’ve told people, to trust us.

But I believe that era is over.

I understand the frustration with tests and metrics, and the appeal of rhetoric about local control and flexibility. But blaming data collection for the failings of education is just shooting the messenger.

Done right, better data and higher standards are tools for greater flexibility, for better decision-making, and timely evaluation at the institutional level.

Accountability doesn’t hinder talented leaders — it gives them the ability to pursue goals effectively.

That’s what our strategic plan is all about, and why it won unanimous support from the UNC Board of Governors.

I’ve signed 17 customized performance agreements with each chancellor in the UNC System, all of them embracing measurable outcomes as a route to excellence.

Here at FSU, Chancellor Anderson crafted a performance plan focused on getting more students across the finish line, increasing the graduation rate by six percentage points,

graduating 25 percent more rural students and 30 percent more low-income students, all while getting more students through in less time.

Our progress will be on display for all to see in newly launched data dashboards showing how each institution, and the System as a whole, does on a yearly basis.

To truly understand our own operation, evaluate our programs, and drive better decision making, we must reform and repair some of the clunky data systems we currently use.

That's why data modernization is our top priority for May's legislative short session.

With a better understanding of our own enterprise, we can move toward a funding model that better serves our priorities and puts our money where our mouths are.

If we care about graduation rates, achievement gaps and creating a 21st century workforce, our resources must match our rhetoric and our goals.

Nationally, we're seeing a deeply discouraging retreat on shared standards and accountability.

But I'm proud that North Carolina is charting a different course, pulling back the curtain and letting measurable results guide our actions and tell our story.

Public Good

Our bottom line matters. But so do the values that are hard to show on a dashboard.

Fulfilling our historic mission to advance the public good is our third, and in many ways the most fundamental issue we face. It's the reason this University exists — the bedrock of everything we do.

A great many of the people in this state who run businesses, teach our children, heal our families, enrich our culture, and set our public policy will pass through the doors of our universities.

What we teach, the behavior we expect, and the standards we model as teachers and public officials helps set the tone for our graduates and the world beyond.

And that's an enormous responsibility.

We live in a world of instant headlines about campus protests and disinvited speakers. A thoughtless remark from a student, a professor, or a university administrator can ricochet across the country, sending everyone to their assigned corners to denounce or defend.

What we do every day as educators and public institutions matters. We have to stand behind the core values of free expression, intellectual diversity, and patient engagement with new ideas.

Our campuses bring together people from different backgrounds to gather in the same place, debate the same books, and navigate the same social life. A college education remains one of the most integrated and intellectually demanding experiences in American life.

Our students recognize the privilege of thinking and learning. They want to live up to that gift, to leave the world in better shape than they found it.

Anyone who says that college students have lost their heads or their desire to be good citizens just isn't paying attention.

But I promise you this — our students are paying attention to us. They're watching how we lead and govern, how we engage in public debate, how we adapt to the needs of our time.

It's up to us to show that public institutions are an ally in the effort to make a better world. That public service is honorable and effective. That trust in our fellow citizens, and faith in the country that unites us, is vital to any vision of real progress.

It's the kind of effort that ensures the civic fabric of a community — the fabric that binds us together — stays strong and vibrant.

Conclusion

By focusing on our shared values; by deploying our public institutions to create opportunity and improve lives; by holding ourselves accountable to our highest ideals and aspirations — we can and we will restore public trust.

The people who come to work every day in our labs and classrooms, our police departments and maintenance crews, our hospitals and health clinics — they're here because they want to make a difference. And they do — all across this state, in all 100 of North Carolina's counties.

Our job as a System is to enable that good work.

To provide opportunity to every North Carolinian and ensure economic mobility;

To hold ourselves accountable and set higher expectations for ourselves;

And to commit ourselves to our public identity and take ownership of our role advancing public discourse, debate and the public good.

UNC System President Friday used to issue a powerful challenge to students.

“Every morning,” he said, “a million North Carolinians get up and go to work for wages which leave them below the poverty line, so they can pay taxes that finance the education you receive. Your job is to figure out how you’re going to pay them back.”

I’m proud to say that we have been and are answering that call. And I know I’ll be standing before you again in a few years to report an even stronger, more effective University of North Carolina System.