

**Interim President Bill Roper  
Board of Governors Remarks  
April 17, 2020**

Greetings everyone.

I regret that we cannot be meeting face-to-face today, but I am grateful that all of us are well enough and able to convene virtually.

The Board has been helpfully encouraging the work of the UNC System, even in trying circumstances such as these. Thank you, Chair Ramsey for your leadership. And thank you, all of you Board members for demonstrating your commitment to guiding the UNC System through this crisis. Your thoughtful approach and your flexibility have been much appreciated.

My gratitude also extends to the faculty, staff, and students at every institution in our System. And also to the chancellors for their leadership at this time. They have all adapted to necessity with good spirit and resourcefulness.

As a System, we have shown resilience during this unprecedented time.

I really appreciate everyone's can-do spirit. Without this positive attitude, we would not have been able to accomplish all that we have in a few short weeks.

\*\*\*

This spirit of cooperation continues to help us make critical and difficult decisions.

Given the uncertainties we are navigating, shortly after our March 20 Board meeting, I directed all of the universities and the UNC System Office to suspend hiring, promotions, and salary actions, except for those that are critical to the mission.

The chancellors have modified their operations accordingly and they are closely monitoring personnel decisions consistent with my direction. At the same time, they are taking necessary actions to ensure that they have faculty and appropriate support staff in place to teach in the fall and to keep our institutions operating and performing our missions.

We have also been actively engaged in contingency planning with the universities over the last several weeks. Our planning focuses on making sure that our universities can perform our essential functions of teaching, research, and service for the people of North Carolina no matter what set of circumstances we face. Our work is forward-looking and has included several pieces of guidance and direction to the universities regarding a number of matters, including: (a) suspension of non-essential hiring; (b) direction as to refunds of housing and dining fees to students; (c) direction to move summer classes online and plan for new student orientation; and (d) guidance concerning the payment of emergency grants to students, among other actions.

The actions we have taken so far and our contingency planning efforts are consistent with what other universities around the country are doing. To be clear, while we certainly must respond and adjust to the immediate impacts we are experiencing in our state and our institutions, we must also take

medium-term and long-term views. To that end, we are taking steps to ready our universities for a return to full operations, while also making plans to make sure they can operate under any set of circumstances.

We understand the important role we have as leaders in the state and we will continue to perform that role. Feedback so far is encouraging. Although many institutions around the country are worried about a potential decline in enrollment, we have every reason to be optimistic about our enrollment picture. Students here in North Carolina are eager to enroll in and attend our universities. We will be here to serve our students and our state, no matter the circumstances.

Last week, the Budget and Finance Committee took a fresh look at our biennial budget request to the General Assembly. Later this morning you will be considering their recommendation, which recognizes the unprecedented situation we are in because of COVID-19.

If you approve the recommendation of the Budget and Finance Committee, the budget request will hold our budget generally in line with 2018-19 levels and request only the most critical operating and infrastructure projects across our institutions.

Overall, this revised biennial budget, if you approve, will represent a \$185 million decrease in operating expenditures from our original budget request and will remove nearly all of the \$632 million of capital improvement projects previously approved by the Legislature.

All of these projects are of critical importance, and they will remain priorities. At the appropriate time and opportunity, we must revisit these delayed projects with a renewed sense of urgency.

We are thankful as always for the financial support the UNC System has received from the General Assembly and the State over the years, and if you approve, we will seek a special COVID-19 request of \$45 million in one-time relief to help partially offset the new expenses and lost revenue as a result of the pandemic.

These revised budget requests will impact our institutions, but we understand that North Carolina's near-term revenue will be lean, and we are adjusting accordingly.

A little more than two weeks ago, we announced our commitment to prorated reimbursements of payments for unused housing and dining services as a result of COVID-19. I am pleased to report that our institutions have already started dispatching these refunds to students. We anticipate that 80 percent of these refunds will be processed by the end of next week, well ahead of our end-of-April deadline we originally issued in our guidance.

We are also keeping our eyes on enrollment numbers. At this point, some institutions are seeing fluctuations, but overall the numbers are holding steady compared to last year. As the next weeks unfold, we will see a clearer picture emerge. We do anticipate a decline in the number of enrolled international students.

\*\*\*

In the meantime, other University work continues.

- The UNC School of the Arts search committee has reviewed a strong pool of applicants and recently completed virtual campus visits. Board of Trustees Chair Ralph Womble and I will be visiting next week concerning their recommendation. We anticipate a nomination to the full Board in May.
- The ECU Chancellor Search is on pause. While our timeline has been delayed due to COVID-19 impacts, the goal remains to name new chancellor for the fall term.
- The Fayetteville State search committee convened in February and had planned constituent listening sessions. However, these meetings were delayed in light of COVID-19 guidance on large gatherings. Chair Stuart Augustine is working with System HR staff to revise the timeline so as to accomplish our goal of having a new chancellor in place for the fall 2020 term.

Today, another change of leadership unfolds closer to home. After this meeting, Adam Schmidt will step down as president of the UNC Association of Student Governments. I would like to commend him for his significant contributions to the leadership of the UNC System. His presence on this Board will be missed, and I wish him best of luck in his future endeavors.

I would also like to applaud the UNC ASG for its recent decision to redirect \$65,000 to student emergency funds at each of our institutions. This money was originally earmarked for ASG conferences and other activities that have since been cancelled or moved online as a result of COVID-19. Remarkably, a number of other donors have now matched these funds and gone beyond, bringing the grand total raised to over \$700,000.

Thanks to UNC ASG's strategic thinking and these generous gifts, these dollars will have an immediate impact on the lives of students who are struggling financially as a result of this crisis. I commend Adam and his fellow ASG members for their vision and generosity, which have rallied others to the cause. And I'm grateful to the donors for their support.

\*\*\*

Looking forward, we will follow the advice of the nation's infectious disease experts and our own experts at UNC, about how and when we should begin to transition back to normal operations. And further, we are in frequent contact with Dr. Mandy Cohen, Secretary of NC Department of Health and Human Services, and are coordinating our operations with Governor Cooper's executive orders.

When we begin that welcomed transition to more normal operations, we will not be at the end of our challenge. We will continue to deal with the financial impact of the crisis, and we will begin the hard work of compiling and studying lessons learned from this event, so that we are even better able to serve the people of North Carolina.

The UNC System has long been a leader in American higher education, and we are determined to lead the way in this challenging time.



In short, the can-do attitude that has been so vital to our efforts through March and April can't stop now. And I'm confident that it won't stop now.

Thank you very much. That concludes my remarks.