



UNIVERSITY OF  
**NORTHERN COLORADO**

**President Kay Norton's State of the University Address**  
September 7, 2016

Hello everybody, and thank you, Dr. Luttmann. . . We treasure traditions and ceremonies in higher education, and I particularly value the tradition of the State of the University address. There is intrinsic value in coming together and collectively thinking about what it means to be a university and our role as stewards of the university on behalf of the students who entrust us with their education. Taking stock and looking ahead also helps us stay focused on what is most important as the year unfolds and unscripted things pop up. We know that nothing goes exactly as planned—and probably shouldn't—but it's important to be clear about where we're headed.

Two years ago, we set five ambitious targets to move UNC toward long-term fiscal sustainability in the face of uncertain state funding. We have passed several major milestones on our way toward those targets. We've made our way a lot farther up the mountain than this time last year, and the view from here is even better.

The first target we set was to grow enrollment to over 15,000 by the fall of 2018, and we have great enrollment news this fall. Final census numbers aren't available yet, but our opening day count indicates we will have more new freshmen and new graduate students for the second year in a row, as well as increases in new transfer students, new international students, total undergraduate enrollment and total graduate enrollment. The growth in new undergraduates, which includes new freshmen and transfers, will be about 6 percent, and new graduate students will increase by about 12 percent. This fact is cause for celebration—such growth does not happen without the efforts of our entire university community. You may recall that we had 22 percent growth in new graduate students last year, so growing an additional 12 percent this year means great progress toward our second target—which is to increase graduate enrollment from 20 to 25 percent of our student body. Graduate students will be about 22 percent of our student body this year.

Our third target is to improve undergraduate persistence by 2 percentage points by the fall of 2018. We've already met this target. We are continuing to build on our success with efforts such as the expansion of the Student Success Collaborative we piloted in 2014 and the development of the integrated student support hub for the Campus Commons. Both of these efforts focus on building a student-focused, data-driven support system to help us identify and meet the individual needs of our students.

The fourth target we set addresses sustainable cost savings, which we defined as permanent budget reductions that free up money to be used for something else. There are two ways to do this: by adjusting budgets down to what we really intend to spend or by

making sustainable operational changes that save money. We committed to identify at least \$2.4 million in new sustainable cost savings by the end of 2018, knowing that it could be necessary to do more in order to adjust for state funding reductions or unmet enrollment revenue projections. Over the next two years, we need to identify an additional \$1.6 million.

Our fifth target is to pursue funding to break ground on the Campus Commons in the summer of 2016 and complete the building by the end of 2018. You may have seen as you arrived today that the building architects are here with the latest renderings and floor plans, just outside this ballroom. If you didn't get a chance to stop on your way in, they will be available when we're done. Last spring, the state committed an additional \$15 million for the Commons, which brings the total commitment of state capital funds to \$38 million. We've passed the halfway mark on our \$12 million fundraising goal, and this fall we will be issuing bonds that will be backed by a \$160-per-year student capital fee. We decided to wait for Homecoming weekend to have our groundbreaking ceremony, but the building will still be done by the end of 2018. The groundbreaking is set for Saturday, October 22, at 10:30 a.m., and I hope you'll be there.

We have much indeed to celebrate about the past year, and these are just the major milestones.

It is the tradition of this event not only to celebrate what we've accomplished over the past year, but also to look ahead to the coming year. Sometimes, in order to see a clear path forward, it's necessary to take a long look back, and I believe this is true for UNC right now. We have been making significant positive changes over the past several years but there are, in fact, some things that should not change, no matter what path we take, what challenges we face, or what success we achieve. So, before we look ahead, I want to look back to UNC's very beginning—to those immutable concepts that make universities *universities*, concepts so fundamental to our existence that we should not let them go unstated.

Academic freedom is the foundation upon which every university is built—the foundation upon which we continue to build the University of Northern Colorado. It is the essential foundation of our students' learning process. It ensures that scholars are free to be scholars—to ask hard questions, to test new ideas, to weigh in on controversial topics as they teach and do research unfettered by outside interests. Only through the free inquiry and exploration of ideas afforded by academic freedom can we deliver on our promise for transformative education.

Hand-in-hand with academic freedom comes community. One scholar does not make a university; this requires a community of scholars. UNC's greatest strength lies not in the sum of our individual efforts, but in how much more we can achieve by working together. Building community is hard and messy work. It can't be accomplished by rules, laws, regulations or codes. It depends instead on human beings—on our good faith effort to do what is right, on the give and take of personal interactions, on trial and error, on some measure of trust that together, we will figure it out.

As you may have heard or seen in the news this summer, part of our ongoing, messy community-building process recently became very public. Some practices we developed in a good faith effort to respond to students' concerns raised serious questions about our commitment to academic freedom, indeed, about our commitment to uphold the basic Constitutional right to free speech. Before I explain how we arrived there, let me say this: UNC is unequivocally committed to free speech and academic freedom and to community.

You may recall, a couple of years ago, we spent considerable effort updating our Discrimination Complaint Procedures, which address discrimination, sexual harassment and retaliation. These procedures lay out our formal process for law-based complaints. However, students sometimes have concerns that don't rise to the level of law-based complaints, and if we truly want to be a welcoming and inclusive campus, we need to listen to these concerns as well. This is why the Bias Response Team emerged. We were trying to address a very real issue by facilitating important conversations. But the way we went about those conversations sometimes made people feel that we were telling them what they should and shouldn't say.

I am pleased to tell you that we've already begun to re-think our process for student concerns. Provost Robbyn Wacker is working with the Faculty Senate to establish how we will handle student concerns about academic matters through the colleges, and Interim Dean of Students Gardiner Tucker is leading the work to clarify how to handle non-academic concerns. Our new approach will uphold the principles of free speech and academic freedom as well as our commitment to create a safe and supportive environment for students. It will address all student concerns not covered by the Discrimination Complaint Procedures, and we will no longer have a separate process for bias-related concerns.

UNC is not alone. Questions about how to navigate the intersection of academic freedom, free speech and community are at the fore across the nation as universities welcome a generation of students who are more diverse than ever, connect to the world through social media as never before, get inundated with increasingly polarized messages, and, sometimes, question the value of the rights and responsibilities that have long been considered essential to the nature of universities. Our promise to students is the opportunity for transformative education—but we cannot fulfill this promise without the benefit of free speech and academic freedom, so it remains our obligation to uphold these fundamental concepts.

We must ensure that UNC is a place where it is safe to question and argue, safe to talk about things that divide us and make us uncomfortable—and we must ensure that students are active participants in this exchange. I believe one of the basic roles of higher education is not merely, as has been stated, to teach students how to think, but to open them up to thinking about many different and conflicting ideas at once. We are preparing students for an extraordinarily uncertain world, a world where differences between right and wrong are sometimes unclear, where there is no definitive them and us, where

important matters cannot be reduced to binary choices. If students leave UNC believing they know all the answers, we have failed them.

Our primary role with students is to educate, and at times this process is necessarily uncomfortable—for everyone. Our promise for transformative education requires us both to challenge and to support students. We are not a service provider and students are not customers; our relationship goes much deeper. We have a duty to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, to encourage students, to guide them—but we must not artificially smooth the path ahead for them. It is our duty to help students learn to navigate difficult situations, but we can't achieve that if we constantly intervene on their behalf. Because we want students to think about things they otherwise would not, we introduce them to ideas they may disagree with—ideas that sometimes appall, offend or frighten. We do this to challenge their assumptions, to show them the difference between evidence and opinion, to help them learn to make solid arguments. This is how the learning process works.

Academic freedom is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for this learning process—for being a university. Our success as a university depends in equal measure on creating a healthy community. Protecting free speech and academic freedom is not antithetical to creating a healthy university community. We can and must do both. Being a healthy community is about welcoming and respecting the differences among us, being civil, continuing to talk to each other when we disagree. But being a healthy community is not about protecting ourselves from disturbing or offensive speech, nor is it about shielding ourselves from every potentially unpleasant or hurtful interaction. When we see someone treated disrespectfully or unkindly, it ignites our impulse to regulate, but rules don't build community. Many of these concerns, in fact, involve a matter of degree that simply can't be parsed out in rules. Is that to say we should do nothing? Certainly not. Should we as a university community encourage civility? Absolutely. Should we as individuals speak up when we believe someone has crossed a line? Absolutely. But we cannot enforce this at the expense of free speech and academic freedom.

Free speech and academic freedom fuel the ferment of ideas, insights and discoveries that emerge from university communities, and we must do all we can to encourage this ferment. We have an ongoing obligation to talk openly about the inherent tension between upholding academic freedom and building community. These are hard conversations, but this tension is what allows us to be a university community.

Now, as we look ahead to the 2016-17 academic year, we do so in light of these fundamental principles.

Our work to be done this year will continue to be framed by our five targets for fiscal sustainability. And, as we keep working toward those targets, we will continue to pay attention to three interconnected priorities—community, the Campus Commons, and enrollment.

First, we have already set the stage for working on community. Last September, we

launched the Campus Climate Initiative, a two-year project to develop and administer a climate survey and identify action steps to use what we learn. Since then, a group of faculty, staff and students has been working with an external consultant to develop the survey, which will launch September 20. You'll be hearing more about this soon. I really hope you'll fill out the survey because we want to hear from every member of the university community. Late last fall, I hosted a series of listening sessions, and in the spring we began to address some of the near-term issues coming out of those by doing things like creating a process for students to add a preferred name to their UNC record, changing our campus hair salon to meet the needs of our entire student body, paving and landscaping at the César Chávez Cultural Center, and identifying meditation spaces. Then, in April, I announced a restructuring of how we support our commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive campus, which included naming Dr. Katrina Rodriguez as Vice President for Campus Community and Climate.

As a campus community, we share the responsibility for creating a welcoming, inclusive and respectful environment where academic freedom and free speech remain sacrosanct. This responsibility is the starting point for conversations we need to have this year to explore questions such as: How can we engage in vigorous debate without becoming adversarial? How can we have respectful discussions with people who don't share our values? Do we have shared values that we can articulate without turning them into another set of rules? Beyond laws and rules, how can we resolve interpersonal conflict? How can we agree to disagree and still move forward together as a community? These questions don't have definitive answers. But the point of conversations like this is not to arrive at a plan or a code or a definitive conclusion. Nor is it to agree on a single point of view. The point is to better understand each other. Without understanding, there can be no community.

As you know, work on the second priority for this year, the Campus Commons, is also well underway. Over the coming year, we need to wrap up the building design, begin construction, and work through details about how the functions moving to the Commons will operate in entirely new ways.

One of the reasons I'm so excited about the Commons is its potential to be a community-building connecting point, in the traditional sense of a public space. We articulated this intention from the start, and the architects have done a remarkable job of translating our idea into a building. The Commons represents the intersection of many interests—all of which are vital to our role as a university. It creates meaningful connections among three traditionally distinct functions—an integrated student support hub, a gateway for campus visitors, and modern performance space for our world-class arts programs—while also providing flexible public space for everyone to use.

Providing modern performance and rehearsal spaces for students and faculty in UNC's world-renowned performing arts programs was a driving factor in developing the Commons. Not only will the 600-seat performance hall in the Commons provide a learning laboratory for students; it will also allow us to reach out to the broader community with hundreds of performances each year. Similarly, we've integrated an art

gallery into the Commons as a flexible space to support both student learning and community connections.

As the gateway to campus, the Commons will allow us to welcome guests—whether they are arts patrons, prospective students, alumni, community members, or tourists on the way to Estes Park. We will tell them our story through interactive exhibits about UNC’s students, faculty, history and purpose.

Another driving force in developing the Commons was the need to better support the student learning process I described earlier. The Commons will be home to a re-imagined student support operation that integrates a number of now-separate functions. It will give students a single point of access for a broad range of services and opportunities. It will help them solve complex problems that now require going back and forth among different offices. It will connect them with opportunities like career planning, community engagement and study abroad. This is not because we’re adding lots of staff, by the way; we’ll be retraining and redeploying current staff who excel at working with students one-on-one. The Commons will be a critical part of delivering on our promise to invest in the *individual* success of each and every UNC student.

The integrated student support hub at the Commons will also be designed to support faculty. The heart of the education process at UNC is the interaction between students and faculty, whether in classes, laboratories, advising sessions or less formal settings. We expect faculty to be subject area experts, teachers and researchers—but being a professor should not mean you need to be an expert in every financial, technical, psychosocial or co-curricular issue your students face. The integrated student support hub will be a resource for faculty. You can refer students to the Commons with confidence that they won’t get the run-around. Or you can call for immediate answers to questions that come up while you’re working with students. You can, in fact, use the integrated student support hub without ever setting foot in the Commons (but I think you should).

The third priority for this year is continuing to grow our enrollment. We will continue to think about enrollment growth in terms of attracting new students as well as improving persistence. This means thinking about new ways to reach undergraduate students in an increasingly competitive market, filling vacant capacity in our graduate programs, expanding programs and launching new programs to address unmet demand, and targeting our student support efforts to meet the individual needs of students. It is also critical that we continue to measure the effectiveness of our recruitment and retention efforts as we try out new approaches.

Every year when I stand here, the things we need to do seem pretty clear, but they never go just as planned. The future is, in many ways, un-chartable —so the skills we need are not so much the skills of cartographers but those of adventurers—improvisation, adaptability, imagination. We will—we must—adapt as we go.

As we work on these priorities, move toward our fiscal sustainability targets, and adjust as we need to, it’s important to keep the long view in mind. Not only do we have to make

things happen in the here and now; we must to do them with an eye to the future. We are temporary, if passionate, stewards of something far greater than ourselves. Being a healthy university community means nothing if we haven't conducted ourselves responsibly, in a way that is fiscally sustainable. To fail to do that would be the ultimate betrayal of our commitment to be a community that provides each and every student who comes here the opportunity for transformative education.