



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

President Kay Norton's State of the University Address
September 12, 2017

Thank you Stephen. Welcome, everybody. One note before I start. As you know, the building that's taking shape right outside this wall behind me is the Campus Commons. The Powers that Be were kind enough to ask if I mind being interrupted by construction noise...and I told them not at all. They did assure me that no matter what it sounds like, nothing will actually come through that wall. But, if they happen to be wrong, I hope you'll give me a heads up.

It is truly gratifying to see the vision for the Campus Commons becoming a reality here in the heart of our campus. As you know, the Commons will be a unique building that reflects the distinctive character of UNC. It meets three longstanding needs on our campus. It will be an integrated support hub for students, a showcase for our world-class arts programs, and a visible and welcoming gateway for visitors. But even more important than the building itself is what will happen inside it. The Commons will meet the needs of our students and our community in more effective, more personalized ways.

To build the Commons, we completely re-imagined our student support operation to integrate services that are scattered all around the campus. The Commons will be the go-to place for students to find opportunities like community engagement, study abroad and career planning, and to get help with complex problems that now send them back and forth among offices. The student support hub is also meant to be a resource for faculty—a place you refer students or call to ask questions when you're working with students.

The 600-seat performance space and art gallery in the Commons are designed foremost to meet the needs of our students and faculty in the arts. Integrating these academic programs into the Commons not only helps bring them the attention they so richly deserve, but also brings beauty and vitality into the home of our student support hub and campus welcome center.

I'm tempted to say more about the Commons, but I'll resist (for now) because there are other things I want to share.

One of the reasons I look forward to talking with you every fall about the state of our university is the opportunity to reflect on the past year. Does last fall seem like a long time ago to you? It does to me, and I think that's because we've come so far since then. A lot has happened, in the world and on our campus, since this time last year. But before I dive into the details, I want to say thank you. Without your hard work and commitment to UNC, the progress we've made would never have been possible.

There's lots of evidence of the progress we've made, both to strengthen our university community and to reinforce our fiscal foundation. I'll tell you first about our community building work, then about the five fiscal sustainability targets.

As we began last fall, there was on our campus, as there was throughout the nation, a palpable sense of anxiety. Tensions always run higher in election years, but the polarization and vitriol of the 2016 election was unprecedented, at least in my memory. It wasn't hard to imagine it popping up on our campus. Layered on top of those worries, over the summer, concerns had arisen that the way UNC was handling student complaints didn't always protect academic freedom or the basic Constitutional right to free speech.

As you may have noticed lately, much of the public discourse about college campuses tries to pit community building against academic freedom and free speech. I reject this false dichotomy, but the concerns about our student complaint process put UNC in the crosshairs of those who see everything in terms of winners and losers. We didn't take the bait; there was no war between the community builders and the protectors of academic freedom and free speech at UNC. We simply set out to improve our well-intentioned but imperfect process. By the end of the year, with tremendous assistance from the Faculty Senate, we had incorporated into University Regulations a student-faculty dispute resolution process that honors the principles of free speech and academic freedom as well as our commitment to create a safe and supportive environment for students. Thank you to everyone involved in this important work.

In October, the pain of the contentious election campaign hit close to home when the Republican presidential campaign rented UNC's Butler-Hancock Athletic Center for a rally. We have a longstanding practice of renting our facilities when we aren't using them. As a public university, we don't—and indeed we cannot—pick and choose whom we rent to on the basis of their viewpoint. It is, in fact, our obligation to facilitate public discourse about important issues, like elections. Over 3,000 people showed up at the rally, including many from UNC—both opponents and supporters.

The rally was on a Sunday, and when I arrived at Carter Hall Monday morning, a group of frustrated students was waiting there for me. Our hour-and-a-half conversation echoed the news stories I'd been reading about other campuses. How could we allow someone like that to speak on our campus? The insults shouted between supporters and opponents at the rally were hurtful for students to hear. Students were afraid. Don't we care about them? I learned that answering questions like these by extolling the virtues of free speech doesn't make for a very productive conversation.

After the election, life on campus did not return to normal. There were, in fact, a number of alarming incidents in which UNC community members were verbally accosted—with outrageous statements like “go back to the country you came from” and epithets based on all kinds of identities—race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, political viewpoint. Then, in the final weeks of the fall semester, a group of students staged multiple protests to voice their concerns about our campus climate. They raised some very legitimate issues—the same kind of concerns that had prompted us to begin developing a campus

climate survey in the fall of 2015.

Even amid the turmoil of last fall, we stayed the course with the campus climate survey, making it available for five weeks in September and October. Our Campus Climate Working Group, which included faculty, staff and students, developed the survey with the help of Dr. Susan Rankin, an external consultant who has conducted climate studies at over 150 colleges and universities. Dr. Rankin and her team analyzed and summarized the survey data and presented the results at two town hall meetings in March.

We did the survey because we wanted an accurate picture of our campus climate. Our intuition told us that not every member of our campus has a positive experience, and we wanted data to help us decide where to focus our community building work. The data confirmed our concerns, and we worked together as a campus last spring to identify concrete action steps. The focus of the action steps for this year is to communicate better, to be more transparent, and to offer professional development opportunities to help students, faculty and staff make UNC a more inclusive place to learn and to work. Next semester, we'll identify additional action steps for next year.

Community building takes ongoing commitment—our work is never done—but it's important to stop and appraise our progress. It's easy to see how hard the past year was, but I hope you also see how resilient we were. Even in the darkest, ugliest moments, we didn't give up. We were willing to have hard conversations. We didn't always agree, but we came together and learned from each other instead of letting our differences tear us apart. That's what strong communities do, and it's something to be proud of.

I wish I could tell you this year will be easier, but the world remains a complex place. The recent change to DACA—the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program—is a prominent example. Regardless of opinions about the program's origin or legality, the people affected are UNC community members who responded in good faith when the federal government promised certain protections if they registered. Through no fault of their own, they now face great uncertainty. We have urged Colorado's Congressional delegation to find a solution. Meanwhile, we will do our best to support and remind those affected that they remain valuable members of our community. To use the words of our Student Senate President Kevion Ellis: "When you mess with one Bear, you mess with all of us."

As we look to the year ahead, it seems unlikely that the polarization around us will diminish. That makes it all the more important that we remain committed to the foundational principle of the university as a marketplace of ideas—where we not only can, but should, engage in discourse about important issues of the day. Marketplaces may be noisy and chaotic, but the competition and diversity that make them so are also the reason they thrive. We don't need to protect ourselves from ideas. We are strong enough to hear them, examine them and reject them. Or decide not to reject them. What we as individuals reject and accept is not a community decision. The community part is about learning from each other. There are lots of questions without a single answer, and talking about conflicting answers helps us understand.

There are many reasons we come together as a university community—to share and learn, to celebrate or mourn, to show solidarity, to air differences. We began the semester with hundreds of people gathered on the Michener green celebrating the eclipse. The next week our students organized a candlelight vigil to recognize the recent tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia. The following week, it was a rally supporting our DACA students. Tomorrow at 4:00, here at the UC in Columbine B, will be a panel discussion about the complex interplay between promoting free speech and being a welcoming campus. This is exactly what universities are supposed to do—and what we must continue to do throughout the coming year.

At the same time as we're thinking about all of these complex community and climate matters, we must also be doing some very basic math. At the end of fiscal year 2019, UNC's revenue must be greater than or equal to our expenditures. Three years ago, we began a five-year effort to move the university toward long-term fiscal sustainability in light of the dramatically changing market for higher education and ongoing limitations on state funding. We set five ambitious targets—grow enrollment by recruiting more students, grow enrollment by improving student persistence, expand graduate programs, find sustainable cost savings, and build the Campus Commons. We've been spending down reserves as we build up our enrollment with the expectation that, by the end of fiscal year 2019, we will rebalance revenues and expenditures so we cash flow positive. We're now just beginning in the fourth year of this work, and we're making steady progress.

Our enrollment target is to grow to 15,000 students. We initially planned to reach that by next fall, but Fall 2020 now looks more likely. The good news is that we've grown steadily for three years. Now that we've passed the fall census date, our headcount is official. We have more new graduate students for the third year in a row—5 percent more than last fall. Total graduate enrollment also grew for the third year in a row, and undergraduate enrollment grew for the second year in a row. Since Fall 2014, we've increased total enrollment by 10 percent, and this fall is our highest enrollment in a decade—12,968 students.

The continued growth in new graduate students means we're also making good progress on our goal to expand graduate programs. Our target is to move graduate enrollment from 20 to 25 percent of our student body, and this fall we increased another percentage point, to 23 percent.

We met our target last fall to improve undergraduate persistence by 2 percentage points. But we'll be getting even more ambitious as we finish integrating our student support services and launch the support hub at the Campus Commons.

We've also made headway on sustainable cost savings, which we've defined as permanent budget reductions that free up money to be used elsewhere. There are two ways to find sustainable cost savings—by adjusting budgets down to what we really intend to spend or by making sustainable operational changes that save money. By the end of fiscal year 2019, we need to have identified a minimum of \$5 million in savings.

It's couched as a minimum because this is one of the ways we adjust if the state reduces our funding or we have less enrollment revenue than we expected. We've identified about \$4 million to date, so we will be looking for an additional \$1 million to \$2 million this year.

The final target we set is funding the Campus Commons and getting it built by the end of 2018. As of last week, the construction is far enough along that the contractor's schedule shows a specific completion date—January 18th of 2019. As these things go, I think that's close enough to say we're right on track. In addition to that completion date, we got the good news that we can start moving into everything except the performance hall in November 2018. So we'll be ready to go when students arrive for the spring semester of 2019, and we can have an official grand opening once the semester is underway.

I'm also pleased to report we're continuing to make good progress on our \$12-million fundraising goal for the Commons. In fact, those fundraising efforts generated enough momentum for us to launch the public phase of a \$45-million comprehensive campaign last March, the first ever comprehensive campaign in UNC's history. In addition to the Commons, the campaign will support scholarships, faculty development, programs and research. We're now more than \$30 million toward meeting our \$45-million goal.

As you know, the long-term goal of these five targets is to ensure that we can deliver on our promise of transformative education into the foreseeable future. To that end, our near-term goal is to rebalance revenues and expenditures so UNC cash flows positive by fiscal year 2019.

We have set ambitious targets, we've stuck with them, and our persistence is paying off. We haven't moved as fast as we expected, but we've made steady progress so I'm confident we're going to get there. We're sticking to the deadline we set for rebalancing revenues and expenditures, but there are many other moving parts. Now that we know where we stand with fall enrollment, the next step is to look at how it's likely to translate into revenue this year and next. We need to set ambitious but realistic enrollment targets for next year. And then we'll see where else we need to adjust. This is what we've done every fall since we started this work in 2014. We've always known there's no magic formula; we have to figure it out as we go. We have, and we will.

One of the many things I've learned in my 15 years as your president is that the sky doesn't fall nearly as fast as we think it will. When you take the short view, everything goes by in a blur, but when you take the long view, what matters most comes into focus. We gave ourselves a short-term deadline for cash flowing positive because we wanted to make sure we do the hard stuff—and it's working. It's a lot like deciding to do the campus climate survey. We didn't expect the results to be all rosy, but we wanted the data to help us understand the problems so we could get to work fixing them. Both are about holding ourselves accountable.

Short-term accountability is no fun, but generations of future students are counting on us. That is what comes into focus when you step back and take the long view. Our work in

the here and now builds the foundation for educating the students who will sustain our economy, protect our democracy, strengthen our society, make our world a better place to live for decades, centuries, perhaps millennia to come. We are stewards of a place that—if we have done our job well—will outlive all of us.

The magnitude of that responsibility has always been humbling for me, as president of UNC. At the same time, it is gratifying to be part of something—together with you—that is so much greater than I alone could be or do. Even so, I have decided that now is a good time for a transition. I plan to retire as your president in the summer of 2018, at the end of June. I'm sharing this now to give our Board of Trustees time to search deliberately and broadly for my successor. And so that we as a campus have time to see through the fiscal sustainability and community building work we've committed to do.

To everything there is a season—so goes the Byrds' hit song of my generation. Why now? This is the beginning of my 16th year, and people have been asking me about retirement for quite a while (a few of them almost as soon as I began). Even 10 to 12 years is unusual for a university president these days. Until now, I've always said I need another two or three years—there are some things I want to see through. The nature of the university makes it impossible to wrap up everything and hand it off with a nice bow on top, but we're coming to a logical transition point. It's the right time for UNC, and it's the right time for me.

It is truly my honor and privilege to work with all of you... and I use the present tense because we're not through working. I am incredibly proud of what we've accomplished together over these past 15 years. We kept a steady heartbeat through one of the most tumultuous periods in the modern history of higher education—and kept our focus on fulfilling our promise to students.

We have increased the number of degrees and certificates we offer students by more than 30 percent and grown our extended campus more than 300 percent. To make UNC accessible even in a time of rising tuition, we've increased our annual investment in financial aid from \$4 million to \$28 million. We've recruited and enrolled an increasingly diverse student body. This fall we welcomed almost twice as many students of color as we did 15 years ago. We have twice earned reaccreditation from the Higher Learning Commission. We moved to NCAA Division I and joined the Big Sky Conference. We built two major residence halls and the Campus Commons, despite the virtual disappearance of state capital funding, while maintaining and beautifying the rest of our campus. This fall, we reached our highest enrollment in a decade.

All of this we did amid great financial turmoil. For eight of the past 15 years, UNC's state funding was less than or equal to the previous year's. We have yet to reach the \$44.8-million mark that was initially appropriated in fiscal year 2002-2003, my first year. After the rescissions that year, our state funding was \$37 million. This year, it is \$39.6 million. We did not lay people off. We did not eliminate academic programs to balance the budget. We did not abandon shared governance. We did not resort to across-the-board budget cutting. Yes, you have indeed given me reason to be proud of my time at UNC.

I mentioned earlier that I want to give our Board of Trustees time to search deliberately and broadly for my successor, and I assure you that is exactly what they intend to do. They will hire a search firm to help with a national search. They are also committed to engaging campus in the search process, including inviting campus representatives to be on the search committee. The Board will be discussing the search at its fall retreat this Friday and will follow up early next week with a campus communication about the search process and timeline.

Meanwhile, I'm going to start advertising the position right now. Being president of the University of Northern Colorado is a deeply fulfilling job, and now is a great time to come to UNC. This is true for many reasons, but four particularly stand out in my mind. They are: how much we've learned in the past decade, our home in Greeley, the people who work at UNC, and most important, our students.

First, we've learned to think and do for ourselves to an extent that was simply unheard of at most public institutions a decade ago. We made an arduous transition from being a place that just reacted to the state's instructions to a place that plans ahead, follows through and adapts as we go. That's the upside of having dealt with uncertainty in state funding, increasing competition, and the dramatically changing needs and expectations of our students. We've built systems and processes that put UNC in a strong position to act on future big ideas. We centralized our cash balances and reserves and started thinking beyond the upcoming year to give our budget more flexibility. Implementing the Banner integrated software system significantly improved our capacity to collect, analyze and use data. In the four years since centralizing our fundraising operation, we've almost doubled our annual results. There are other examples—a sophisticated financial aid model, our marketing presence, our soon-to-be-integrated student support operation, and that's just to name a few.

Second, Greeley is a great reason to come to UNC. I've loved Greeley since I moved here in 1976 right out of law school, and now I have lots of company. Great things are happening downtown—entrepreneurs and artists are creating a college town vibe, restaurants and retail are taking off, and the new hotel is fabulous. Even with all that, Greeley has something much deeper and more essential than glamour. It's a vibrant, friendly and genuinely diverse community where it's easy to get involved and affordable to live.

Greeley is a college town in the best possible sense. There's a spirit of collaboration and cooperation between the city and the university. Neither of us would be as successful without the other. The histories of UNC and the broader community have been intertwined since the creation of the State Normal School in 1889. Without Greeley's support, there would have been no UNC. Greeley's citizens knew what they were doing. According to our recent economic impact study, UNC had a \$329-million impact in northern Colorado in 2015-16. We generated 1.3 percent of northern Colorado's gross regional product, and for every dollar we received from taxpayers, we returned \$8.70 in revenue. That's a pretty solid return on investment.

Third, all of you here today, and the faculty and staff who couldn't join us, are a compelling reason for someone to want to be UNC's next president. One of the things I've grown to understand and appreciate over the past 15 years is how many UNC faculty and staff make the university's mission their own mission. You feel a deep and personal responsibility for the successes of our students. This is not just your job—it is your passion. The light you bring to all that we do here—whether you are teaching students, vacuuming floors or serving dinner—is one of the things that truly distinguishes UNC.

The most powerful reason of all to come to UNC is our students. They come here in search of the true American dream—a dream of a “better and richer and fuller” life. That is the dream James Truslow Adams described in 1931 when he coined the phrase, American dream. It's not just a dream of “motor cars and high wages,” he said. It's about having the opportunity to develop to our fullest potential regardless of our circumstances.

We at UNC are the guardians and enablers of that American dream. It is necessary but not sufficient to prepare students for successful careers. We must also prepare them to have fulfilling lives, to engage in intelligent public discourse, to participate in government, to thrive in a changing, global world.

One of the books I read this summer was *Hillbilly Elegy*, by J.D. Vance, a 31-year-old who grew up in Kentucky and Ohio in pretty dire circumstances, went to the Marines, then to Ohio State, and then to Yale Law School. One of the powerful things about his story was that—despite the dysfunction and addiction and poverty—throughout his extended family there was an unwavering faith that someday someone would get to go to college and live the American dream. There are a lot of those families in Colorado too, and their kids and grandkids and great-grandkids realize their dreams at UNC.

I believe that UNC is, in fact, even more about the American dream than Yale. When J.D. Vance talked about going to Yale, he said he felt like his spaceship had crashed in Oz. I remember feeling like that at Wellesley. My hair was wrong. My clothes were wrong. My accent was wrong. It took me a while to figure out how to fit the mold; then I moved to a new dorm, made a fresh start, and did just fine. But it doesn't have to be that hard. At UNC, you don't need to conform if you want to belong. That's one of the very powerful things about this place. There is no typical UNC student. This is a place where whoever you are, wherever you come from, you've got a shot.

Seeing those students walk across the stage at graduation, shaking their hands, handing them their diplomas—that is why you really want to be president of the University of Northern Colorado.

But enough recruiting. We have work to do. I am dead serious about seeing through the fiscal sustainability and community building work we've committed to. I'm counting on you, as always, to be a part of the work we need to do...and I'm looking forward to doing it with you.