



A Message from the **PRESIDENT**

Happy Holidays!

It's been a busy month and a busy year in higher education across our state and nation. As we move into the holiday break, here's what's on my mind at the UNC System.

Tax Reform

Tax reform is now a reality. I applaud the work in Congress to advance a pro-growth agenda, with a more competitive corporate tax rate and a simpler tax code for individuals through a higher standard deduction.

As I wrote last month in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), a number of provisions in the original bills posed a threat to higher education and I'm grateful that two of the most troubling provisions, the elimination of the graduate student tuition waiver and of the student loan interest deduction, were not included in the final bill.

We'll continue to monitor the rollout of the new law and in particular watch for effects on philanthropic giving due to changes in the standard deduction.

Higher Education Act Reauthorization

As tax reform wraps up, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) begins. Last Wednesday, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, under the leadership of North Carolina Representative Virginia Foxx, advanced a bill to the full House that contains a number of promising ideas.

In particular, I am encouraged by the move towards “one grant, one loan” in federal financial aid, efforts to improve early awareness among students and families about financial aid options, and steps towards further incentivizing 15-hour course loads and on-time graduation.

I look forward to engaging with the House and the Senate in the New Year as our federal lawmakers work to take full advantage of the opportunity afforded by a once-in-a-decade reauthorization process. To be a success, I believe the final bill must strongly ensure accountability and implement broader efforts at data collection.

This will be a lengthy process with plenty of opportunity for input and debate. There are worthwhile ideas from both sides of the aisle to improve higher education and prepare for the future.

Skepticism of Higher Education

One reason HEA reauthorization is so crucial is because we must adapt to counter the growing skepticism of higher education across the country. There have been no shortage of articles highlighting this trend, especially in light of the tax reform provisions concerning higher education.

Just this week, [Politico](#) featured a number of university presidents reacting to the national environment. The headline: “We’ve been blindsided.” Respectfully, I disagree.

The issues we face today have long been building, and we must stop being surprised and start fixing them.

What I’m Reading-

A look at some of the articles and arguments on my desk.

Partisanship:

In [The News and Observer](#), a reminder that the partisan battles that dominate the headlines aren’t reflective of the real work that happens on our campuses.

Rural Divide:

In [The Wall Street Journal](#), a straightforward telling of one woman’s journey from rural Indiana, to San Francisco, and back; illuminating the growing divide between rural and urban America, but also the enduring ties.

Upward Mobility:

In [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), a call for colleges and universities to remember America’s stated commitment to meritocracy and a wide range of recommendations to help eliminate systemic barriers to low-income and first-generation students.

DACA:

In [The Washington Post](#), a plea to pass legislation protecting DACA recipients, this time from unusual co-authors Tim Cook and Charles Koch. It joins appeals from [National Security Leaders](#), [House Republicans](#), and many others – including [my own call last spring in the Washington Post](#). We must uphold our promise to these young people and listen to the [nearly 8 in 10 Americans who support preserving DACA](#).

Progress in North Carolina

At the UNC System, we're working on doing just that. Over the weekend, [I took to The News and Observer](#) to draw attention to our [16 new performance agreements](#), signed at each of our institutions, which lay out measurable, ambitious goals that will help close the divide in our state between those who are thriving and those who aren't receiving the benefits of a growing economy.

Dashboards for these agreements will be published online next month and we will continue to be active and transparent in telling the story of where we succeed and where we fall short.

How well we tackle the growing economic divide and ensure mobility for all our citizens will define our success.

But support for higher education is not only driven by who benefits, but also perceptions of who is welcome at our institutions. If people don't see leaders, faculty, and students who look and think like them at our institutions, then they may question whether those institutions are for them or their children.

This matters whether we're talking about race, gender, zip code, socioeconomic class, or political ideology. And there's work to be done on each of these issues.

Ideological Diversity

Last week we saw progress on the latter of those – ideological diversity and viewpoint diversity – as we invited Princeton University professor Robert George to Chapel Hill.

Professor George held an engaging and thought-provoking Q&A with the UNC Board of Governors about Princeton's efforts to promote civil discourse, encourage scholarship and study where the best arguments from all sides are represented, and help build an environment where students' and faculty members' beliefs are respectfully and thoughtfully challenged at every turn.

Princeton has done this through the creation of the [James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions](#), which brings in conservative voices alongside liberal voices in a way that many other universities do not. Naturally, professor George's visit [created significant discussion](#).

But this is not a radical idea. In fact, it's what many chancellors, deans, and faculty try to do in their classrooms and what students want out of their education. Scholarship and study should challenge preconceptions and beliefs, whatever they may be. It should expose students to ideas they have not considered and ensure their views are informed and challenged by the best arguments from all sides.

I encourage everyone to watch professor George's [Q&A with the UNC Board of Governors](#) and his [fascinating C-SPAN interview with his colleague and collaborator Dr. Cornel West](#) to explore these ideas more deeply.

This is what ideological diversity at a university is about. Many faculty across the UNC System succeed in this approach. We must be thoughtful as a System about what we can do to support those efforts and help enable and promote a full range of views.

Ensuring students have access to top faculty representing all sides at the highest intellectual level is a pressing issue. When people look at our universities, rightly or wrongly, they often don't see this. Instead, they assume that dissenting views just aren't present. And that assumption is harming higher education's traditional role as a venue for America's competition of ideas.

The Work Goes On

Higher education has dominated the headlines the past month in many ways and will continue to do so over the next year. In my view, it's a testament to the importance of our work. Broad access to quality higher education is crucial in solving so many of our challenges.

I encourage you to share this [sign-up link](#) with any friends and colleagues who may want to receive these updates and as always, reach out to me with any questions or suggestions at president@northcarolina.edu. I wish you and your families a merry Christmas and a happy holiday season.



Margaret Spellings
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University of North Carolina System



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