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UNC System making progress but there's more work to do

Op-Ed for the North State Journal

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It was nearly 60 years ago that leaders from Charlotte College hosted the first official gathering on their new campus. Just as the big kickoff began, the weather turned and rain forced everyone to find cover in the biggest room available — an old barn.

It's hard to imagine today, but the bustling campus of the state's fastest-growing university was built on wide-open pastureland. UNC Charlotte came into being long before Charlotte was a global banking hub, a center of big data and advanced manufacturing, and a perennial contender for the best place to start a business or a family.

The University's rise from a small center for returning World War II veterans mirrors this region's growth from North Carolina's up-and-coming city to one of the most dynamic metro areas in the country.

Today, UNC Charlotte is hosting another big event in uptown Charlotte, 22 minutes by light rail from where that barn once stood. The UNC System is kicking off its 2018 State of the University Tour, highlighting the emerging needs of a fast-changing state.

Welcoming growth while preserving quality; investing in services and infrastructure that benefit both urban and rural North Carolina; and driving an innovative economy while meeting the age-old need for a sound and meaningful education. Charlotte and its public university are addressing all of these demands.

Across the state, the UNC System is making steady progress. Graduation rates are up 6 percentage points since 2012; annual research funding is up by more than \$300M; and in-state tuition is now firmly capped, ending the cost spiral that threatened to price many families out of the market.

UNC Charlotte is doing fantastic work to help meet the UNC Board of Governors' Strategic Plan goals of boosting on-time graduation, enrolling more low-income students, and welcoming more community college transfers. Almost half the students at UNC Charlotte started out somewhere else, making the University a magnet for talented students looking to earn a competitive and affordable degree.

All of this work is guided by our deep belief that higher education must do more to help restore faith in the American Dream. Economic mobility is the defining issue of our time, and Charlotte represents one of the most important experiments in the country for providing opportunity for all citizens.

From Virginia to Mississippi, the South as a whole struggles with economic opportunity, and Charlotte stands out as the least upwardly mobile of all major American cities. But it also stands out for the honesty and urgency of its response.

Through a community-wide effort, and in partnership with UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute, the region is embracing the call to give all people a fair shot at earning a better life. Access to higher education must be a core

part of that effort. Statistics show that a student from the bottom income quintile who enrolls at UNC Charlotte is nearly *six times* more likely to reach the top quintile than a student who doesn't go to college.

That's remarkable, and it speaks to the life-changing power of a public university focused on its core mission.

If economic mobility is one key challenge we're confronting, ensuring and expanding accountability is our second. We'll make progress on these key goals only if we're willing to measure them and make the results available for all to see. That's why the UNC System is launching new data dashboards that will show statewide progress on our most important metrics and lay out each institution's unique contribution.

That includes contributions like UNC Charlotte's commitment to graduating 30 percent more low-income students, boosting research funding by 44 percent, and improving graduation rates by more than 6 percentage points — all by 2022. And every campus in the state will make its own unique contribution to our overall success.

That's one of the most important ways we can meet our third key challenge — protecting and advancing the public good. But serving the state means more than just conferring degrees. Higher education also has a responsibility for setting a respectful tone, contributing to the public debate, producing scholarship and research on global problems, and shaping leaders and citizens who embrace the American ideal of public service.

UNC President Bill Friday, who oversaw the creation of UNC Charlotte, 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."

That simple truth continues to guide our work in building a University with the strength and focus to answer Fridays' call.

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