

## Blazing a Trail

Hello and welcome for the kick-off of our first academic year as the University of North Georgia!

Several months ago, I asked you to imagine ... to imagine the opportunities we will be able to provide students as we create multiple pathways toward degree completion.

These past 18 months have been challenging and much has been asked of you as we have worked through rapid change. You have endured long hours, shared office spaces, and worked through reorganizations. I thank you.... Now, we are now positioned to actively shape our future and become a model of transformation in higher education.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

I believe we are blazing a mighty trail in the world of higher education, and we are gaining momentum to become a university of national distinction.

We have embarked on a journey at a time when higher education is facing many challenges. Though highly valued in the past for the opportunities that a college education provides for its graduates, public colleges and universities are facing new and increased expectations for efficiency and performance.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' top 10 list of state policy issues this year includes: boosting institutional performance, college readiness, competency-based and online education, and economic and workforce development, among others.

All universities are adjusting to these challenges, and these are real issues that we must face. The good news is that we have great opportunities to succeed.

With four campuses in the most rapidly growing region in Georgia, we have been given a mission to increase college-completion to keep pace with economic development and community needs.

Opportunity characterizes UNG. Through a seamless continuum of post-secondary and continuing education, the scope of our degree programs and leadership development opportunities, and multiple campuses, UNG is creating a new and rare educational experience.

We are all connected under the UNG umbrella by four pillars that permeate every aspect of the university and every campus community. These pillars are leadership, engagement, student success, and a commitment to excellence.

- **Leadership** that is grounded in time-honored values and relevant practices.
- **Engagement** that supports student development, is responsive to regional needs, and connects us to global partners and opportunities.
- **Student success** that fosters and celebrates academic achievement and personal development.
- **A commitment to excellence** that is demonstrated through innovation, service and performance.

These shared tenets are a source of strength and create the foundation for enduring success and a holistic educational experience that sets UNG apart from any other institution in the country.

Based on these 4 pillars, UNG's four campuses provide distinctive educational opportunities and multiple pathways for a wide variety of students. From the Gainesville Theatre Alliance to IESA, from our winning athletics program to our Corps of Cadets (which, by the way is larger than at any other point in our history), and from dual-enrollment programs for high-schoolers to preparing students for transfer opportunities, from doctoral education to undergraduate research, our campuses each have their own signature elements that contribute to our overall success.

Let me talk about undergraduate research for a moment. We know that it contributes dramatically to student achievement by engaging students in experiential learning. In order to maximize the opportunities undergraduate research provides, we are creating a new position - the Assistant Dean for Student Research and Scholarship - to support and expand initiatives in this area.

This person will report to Eric Skipper, Dean of Honors and Graduate Studies. I've talked with Eric at length about positioning some of our students for nationally competitive scholarships, such as Goldwaters, Fulbrights, Jack Kent Cook, and others.

We are both confident that we have outstanding associate and baccalaureate students who are capable of earning these scholarships. However, for our students to be successful, they need coaching and preparation in a wide variety of topics. We will conduct an internal search for someone who will coordinate undergraduate research, honors conferences, and honors programs and who is committed to helping our students compete for these opportunities.

Our goal is not to become like every other university, but to embrace the challenges we face and to build upon our strengths to be stronger than the sum of our parts. Big challenges can lead to greatness. I envision an environment fueled by creative and innovative ideas and aspirations. To accomplish this, we are going to make an unprecedented investment in our people and in our programs.

First of all, let me address our need to invest in the faculty. The faculty stands at the heart of the academic community and its members are essential to the success of the university's mission. That is why we will launch three bold new initiatives that support the faculty.

- One of the concerns that I have had is how to create opportunities for faculty development. Ongoing faculty development is critical to faculty excellence, and, as a result, student achievement. Beginning this fall, we will sponsor 25 **Presidential Professional Engagement Awards** of up to \$2,000 each to support professional development opportunities for faculty to remain state-of-the-art in their disciplines.
- Coupled with that, it is imperative that our faculty have in-depth opportunities to enhance their knowledge and advance their disciplines. To support those opportunities, we will initiate **Presidential Summer Scholar Awards** - 6 awards of up to \$10,000 each for tenured or tenure-track faculty to support focused and meaningful research, as well as scholarly and creative activities.
- Finally, to further maximize the many exciting opportunities available to us as the University of North Georgia and your innovative ideas, we will fund **Presidential Academic Innovation Awards** - 10 awards of up to \$5,000 each and 40 awards of up to \$1,000 each -- to support initiatives in teaching and learning and student success.

For example, faculty and professional staff members might collaborate to use technology to improve advising processes or to create multidisciplinary programs. We will look at all areas -- distance learning capabilities, MOOCs, certificate programs, strategic language initiatives, global initiatives, undergraduate research, and more -- to build upon our strengths to ensure we create academic and professional opportunities for our students.

I have talked with Mark Spraker, chair of the Faculty Senate, and asked that the Senate appoint committees to accept and review applications for these grants, and he has agreed. The funding will be provided for activities spanning January 1 to December 31, 2014. You will receive follow-up information, including timelines and procedures, via email from Dr. Maryellen Cosgrove, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs.

A faculty of excellence requires the commitment and support of a community of excellence. From admissions to student involvement, from the business office to alumni relations, in the end, even the most accomplished faculty is only as strong as its surrounding community. Our professional, administrative and service staff members are integral to the success of the university and our students, and I am increasingly encouraged by the performance I've seen. Your hard work and dedication have resulted in excellent audit reports, faculty awards, and excellent recognition, in general, for the university.

We are reviewing our employee awards to ensure we recognize outstanding individual contributions to departmental and university excellence.

Additionally, we will implement the "North Star Award" as a new initiative to recognize outstanding customer service across the university. These awards will be presented at Staff Council sack lunches, which will be held on each campus each semester. You will receive full details by email soon from Beth Arbuthnot, Director of Human Resources.

We are on the brink of something big. As we seek to implement innovative ideas and practices, we must not rely on "the way we've always done things." We need new ideas that will take advantage of our existing strengths and resources. So, all of those great ideas you've had on the shelf for 10 years... dust them off and bring them to the table. Let's see just how far we can take this university. While not every idea will come to fruition, we have a really exciting opportunity to create our own future. This is a time for innovation!

Against this backdrop, I encourage you all to contribute to our forward-looking strategic planning process that will continue this fall. The planning process encompasses our shared vision and values, identification of institutional priorities, strategic partnerships, and sustainability. Your participation will help shape UNG for years to come.

In closing, I ask you again to imagine what we can become. Imagine the educational, cultural and economic impact on our region. Imagine the legacy for generations of students.

In 1986, the band Timbuk3 had a one-hit wonder with its song, "The future's so bright, I gotta wear shades." The future of the University of North Georgia and our region is just that bright!

What an exciting opportunity we have. Thank you for your dedication. Thank you for all that you do for the University and our students. My best wishes for the coming year.