

Celebrating Today, Building Tomorrow

Welcome and thank you for being here today! I am honored to kick-off the beginning of the new academic year with a report on the "State of the University."

I would like to begin by recognizing and thanking the members of the UNG Faculty Senate and Staff Council who are in attendance. Thank you for your service to UNG and for your leadership and collaboration to strengthen our University. Please stand if you are serving with either of these groups.

We cannot overstate the importance of these individuals stepping into peer-selected leadership roles and the tremendous impact they have on our shared commitment and on shared governance.

As you know, our mission calls us to develop leaders for a diverse and global society, and it highlights our special designations as a State Leadership Institution and as The Military College of Georgia. Each of us in our respective roles brings that mission to life. UNG students, faculty and staff increasingly lead in classrooms, in our communities, in the field, and around the globe.

Our five-year strategic plan, *Engaging UNG*, was produced in 2014, and enormous progress has already been made on many of our priorities. The plan's four strategic goals serve as our roadmap, so let's review each of those and some of UNG's related achievements.

In our first goal, "Promoting Academic Excellence and Innovation," we talk about our culture as a state university focused on students and centered on learning and teaching.

One of the reasons our graduates are so successful is that we offer strong educational opportunities that position them for success in today's global marketplace.

Many of our academic disciplines are experiencing massive changes, including media and communications, computer and information sciences, design, and healthcare, just to name a few.

I am proud that our programs and faculty continue to create new world-class opportunities through advances like the College of Arts and Letters' new degree in bachelor's degree in Strategic and Security Studies and the College of Health Sciences and Professions' new virtual hospital.

From using 3D printers to design medical devices to combatting human trafficking in India, and from the Professional Development Program for business students to

instructional technology for education majors, we are preparing our graduates to excel in the workplace or future studies.

We know we do an excellent job, both in and outside the classroom teaching critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication – professional leadership skills that make a difference. We must continue to find innovative ways to reach a constantly changing student body and help them prosper.

This year, our Quality Enhancement Plan – or QEP – is focused on students graduating "On Time & On Target." The QEP increases the number of professional advisors available to students and will also institute new advising tools.

Quality advisement is one of the strongest high-impact practices to promote student success, and I am grateful to the QEP Task Force for their truly outstanding work. Will the committee, led by Terri Carroll and Eugene Van Sickle, please stand and be recognized.

We pride ourselves on our retention and graduation rates, as well as the quality of our graduates – ranging from the associate to the baccalaureate and to the graduate programs. While our freshman to sophomore retention rate had slipped ever so slightly, this fall we are already seeing a slight increase.

A huge factor is the availability of student housing. We are pleased to open the Commons in Dahlonega this year, and that, along with our robust QEP, will make a difference. If and when we are able to find a way to offer student housing in Gainesville, that, too, will make a difference.

But, it's not just about housing and advising. The data suggest that faculty-student relationships are imperative to persistence, graduation and career success. We are blessed to have faculty who genuinely care about our students, and we must work to diminish the ever-present stressors campuses often face, including having enough space and ensuring competitive salaries. I'll talk more about that in a moment.

Our commitment to our region and a unique dedication to applied research and creativity set us apart. Our Strategic Plan recognizes UNG's capacity for research, scholarship, and creative activity. We have made this an institutional priority, and the results have been impressive.

The research activities of our faculty and staff across the university attracted grants and contracts that last year alone generated almost \$3.2 million in research expenditures and our research submissions continue to increase dramatically.

These projects – which are aligned with our mission, culture, leadership, resources and practices – help us find new ways to mentor and encourage students to become better leaders and engaged scholars.

Our strong academic programs and innovative new programs, such as the QEP, attention to student services, our regional needs, and our research opportunities – all support Goal I. We must continue to promote academic excellence and innovation.

Goal 2 is about "Enhancing Leadership and Development of the Whole Person." I believe the success of any great university, especially a great public institution like UNG, is grounded significantly in its commitment to leadership and development.

Like all universities today, we have challenges on our campuses with increasing reports of safety issues, lack of civility in social media, and frequent polarization in lieu of conflict resolution. As a State Leadership Institution, we stand tall in our emphasis on leadership and character development of our students. With signature programs, like our Corps of Cadets and the Leaving a Legacy of Leadership conference, we set a high bar of excellence for others to emulate.

In related areas, I am extremely pleased that Student Affairs and University College, in particular, working so closely together on student success initiatives. From the Student Money Management Center to our new Food Pantry, we are helping students succeed in meaningful ways. Added to that, our Financial Aid and Bursar's offices are among the best I have ever seen in helping students sort through financial matters.

But our commitment to leadership and development must not be lip service. We must also provide leadership and development opportunities for faculty and staff. We must not allow ourselves to become stale; our students deserve better. We must learn from one another. We must continue to find creative opportunities for each of us to remain current in our fields and explore innovative ways to meet the challenges of this great institution.

One area of growth has been our emphasis on embracing diversity to ensure that UNG becomes even more welcoming and inclusive.

Toward that end, I appointed Sheila Caldwell as advisor to the president on diversity last year. She, along with UNG's Diversity Council, led by Ester Morgan Ellis, have made significant progress. Through their efforts, we begin this new academic year with a written commitment to diversity that is focused on inclusion, innovation and excellence.

Additionally, they will soon provide you information on a campaign to identify and promote diversity-themed events and topics across the University as OURS – representing Open, Understanding, Respectful, and Safe.

Further, kudos to the College of Education for developing a graduate-level certificate program to explore historic and contemporary diversity topics. Almost 20 faculty and staff completed that program this year, and I understand it was a valuable experience. All of you who were a part of this program, please stand to be recognized for your leadership and commitment to learning.

Our greatest asset is our people – students, faculty and staff – and that is not just rhetoric. We are a community of thinkers, learners and doers. We draw strength from this community, and it has enabled us to achieve great successes.

I am pleased that UNG continues to recruit and attract outstanding faculty and staff. We have or are in the process of hiring faculty and staff for 128 new positions this year. Coming from all parts of the country, they will bring a variety of new ideas and perspectives to our community that will be invaluable as we move forward.

All of our new faculty and staff, please stand so that we can welcome you to our UNG family. I am confident that our faculty and staff will be a source of support for you as you become engaged in the institution and in our communities.

Goal 3, "Expanding Engagement and Educational Opportunity," points to UNG's stewardship of higher education in this region. With an annual economic impact of \$545 million in our communities, our role is significant, as is our responsibility.

We opened our Blue Ridge Campus in August last year, and I'm pleased that they have grown from 21 students to more than 100 this fall. This campus will be a game-changer in our ability to serve that portion of our region. Sandy Ott and her team are exploring creative and innovative ways to build a new campus that will be highly innovative. For example, they have created a cohort program for first-time, full-time students that includes workshops, coaching, and intrusive advising.

Our Regional Education and Economic Development – or REED – initiative will also serve to advance our region as we continue to build mutually-beneficial community partnerships. These partnerships will increase educational and job opportunities across our region.

Related to this, as the region's comprehensive public university, we know we must serve a wide range of higher education needs, including expanded graduate-level programs that strategically meet the advanced education needs of area business, education and professional leaders. We know that advanced degrees are becoming increasingly important for career progression and employability in certain sectors, and I look forward to exploring these opportunities with our deans.

Further, as a state university, we have a strong commitment to ensuring students have the opportunity to pursue higher education. There is an acute need for additional merit- and need-based scholarship support, and this has been one of my top priorities since taking office. Thanks to the support of our alumni and community stakeholders over the past three years, we have increased scholarship funding from less than \$500,000 to nearly \$2.5 million annually — that's a 500 percent increase.

This past year, we raised more than \$2.6 million for student scholarships, nearly doubling the previous annual mark of \$1.35 million.

Further, our endowment has exceeded \$50 million, and UNG is one of only six USG institutions to achieve this level of success. Congratulations to Jeff Tarnowski and the entire UNG advancement team for their great work!

Our fourth goal, "Building Campus Identity and Institutional Unity," acknowledges our evolution as a consolidated university, the unique character of each of our campuses, and our shared mission of academic excellence, student success and leadership development. To support this goal, we are embarking on two very important initiatives this year.

First, I am asking a group of faculty and staff representatives to document the traditions and activities that contribute to each campus' culture, educational environment and student experience. Traditions are important because of their ability to connect us to one another as a community.

Our campuses are each different, and it is important to document the traditions of our more established campuses, so that we don't lose sight of them, and to seek opportunities to build fresh traditions on our newer campuses.

The second initiative is a long-term, strategic effort to communicate UNG's identity and mission. The University of North Georgia has a strong reputation for quality and student success.

This is not a trivial endeavor. Branding helps us attract high-quality students, faculty and staff, and it positions us to better compete for research dollars and community support.

We will all benefit from presenting a unified identity. Thank you to Kate Maine and her team in University Relations for professionally managing this process.

Our new brand platform, "Lead where it counts":

- is grounded in our leadership mission;
- reflects our core values of excellence, student-focus, integrity, engagement, and service;

- and, most importantly, is authentic to who we are and to the student experience.

Through "Lead where it counts," we will share the many forms of leadership modeled by our students, faculty and staff across all campuses and in every program.

You know these stories and the impact firsthand - students who are the first in their families to attend college, students who are engaged with their communities, military students, students who catapulted their careers with internships or study abroad opportunities, and so many more.

This is who we are, and we lead where it counts. As our best ambassadors, you need to know that as you leave here today, you will receive a t-shirt – fresh off the press – with our new tagline, lead where it counts.

I hope you will wear it proudly and talk about our educational opportunities and some of the great things we do.

In conclusion, we will enroll over 18,000 students this fall. In contrast to many of our peers, we receive more and more applications each year and the number of students in our region continues to increase. This growth is a positive trend; however, I know it presents challenges.

- First, we will strategically manage our growth, to include helping students who may have greater success at a different institution find the most appropriate educational opportunity.
- Second, I know that because of our growth and increased number of faculty and staff, space is at a premium and that some faculty and staff are sharing offices. We are evaluating and investing in facilities and infrastructure at all of our campuses as we can. However, we will also be creative in finding ways to best meet our space needs. For example, we have repurposed administrative space for greater efficiencies, we have moved some functions like the Gainesville Testing Office off-campus, and we are renovating and expanding facilities where possible.
- Third, one of our top priorities is to increase faculty and staff, as evidenced by this year's budget, which added 70 new faculty positions and 48 new staff positions, a total of nearly 120 positions not counting part time and limited term positions.
- In addition to adding new positions, we have been very intentional about addressing salaries. In the past four years, we have invested \$5.2 million in

faculty and staff salaries through equity adjustments and another \$4.8 million in merit increases.

While we are not yet where we would like to be, we have received greater increases than some of our peers and will continue to make competitive faculty and staff salaries a priority.

- At our budget hearings this fall, we will once again request funds for faculty and staff salaries, new positions, and sector equalization to close the gap in UNG's FTE funding.

Despite those challenges, I am excited about UNG's future. As a reminder, our institutional vision is that, "UNG will be a regional and national leader for academic excellence, engagement, educational opportunity, and leadership development."

Someone recently challenged me to think about, "How will you know when you are achieving the vision?" Well, the evidence is mounting:

- Our SACS accreditation review couldn't have been any better, and we fully expect that UNG's accreditation will be reaffirmed for 10 years. Thank you, Denise Young and Betsy Cantrell for your leadership!
- Our students, faculty and staff have broadened their horizons through study abroad and international exchange opportunities with nearly 30 partners around the globe, as well as through the numerous growing number of international students and faculty on our campuses.
- Our students have won incredible recognitions, including a national softball championship, two cadets in the top 10 nationally for two years running, Fulbright scholarships, NIH scholarships winners, and Jack Kent Cooke scholarships.
- With increasing support from the USG and our state legislators, we have received funding for significant capital projects, including the annex in Oconee, the library renovation in Gainesville, and the Convocation Center in Dahlonega.
- UNG was recently ranked on Forbes magazine's list of "Best Colleges" for the first time ever, and we were ranked fourth among the six USG institutions on the list. Georgia Tech, UGA, Georgia State, and UNG – followed by Georgia Southern and Kennesaw.

Thank you for all that you do to support the University of North Georgia. Your devotion to UNG and to our students makes a positive difference in the lives of countless

individuals in our campus community – and also to individuals and communities across our state, our nation and around the globe – and I thank each and every one of you.

I challenge us all to imagine where we can take our impressive momentum and rise to the challenges of higher education with bold thinking, intentionality, and the collaborative, confident spirit that is a hallmark of this fine institution.

Vance Havner, a theologian, once said, "The vision must be followed by the venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps – we must step up the stairs."

We are "stepping up the stairs" to fulfill this vision, and all of us share in this extraordinary recognition for our efforts.

Thank you and best wishes for a wonderful year ahead!