

It is so great to see all of you today and to celebrate the beginning of the new academic year.

Before I go any further, I want to thank the leaders and presenters from units across UNG who have planned today's events. UNG LEADS Day is a wonderful way for us to come together to learn, to celebrate our achievements, and to connect with one another. Would all of the organizers and presenters please stand to be recognized?

I also want to recognize Jamie Mitchem, CEO of the Faculty Senate, and Kasi Ives, chair of the Staff Council. They are strong representatives of their groups, and I appreciate their leadership. Jamie and Kasi, would you please stand.

Finally, I would like to recognize and thank my husband Glenn who is with us today.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the walk on the moon. I may be showing my age, but I have vivid memories of watching the walk on a large screen on the main plaza in Monterey, Mexico, during a study abroad trip. I don't think I was as impressed as a college student as I am now with the magnitude of that walk.

The space race, as it was called then, began with a challenge from President John F. Kennedy to go to the moon, not because it was easy, but because it was hard. He called it a goal that would serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, and he described it as a challenge that we were willing to accept and one that we were not willing to postpone.

That endeavor to go to the moon – that goal – spurred unprecedented exploration, discovery, and technological advancement. It also galvanized our nation and became a point of national pride.

While we have not walked on the moon, we have demonstrated that same determination for doing something impactful, and what we have accomplished as a university is remarkable. Simply put, we have become a more comprehensive and dynamic institution.

A report on regional, public universities published this summer by Inside Higher Ed highlighted several issues confronting American higher education: funding, access, affordability and college debt, degree completion, and shifting enrollment trends.

These issues contribute to an ongoing debate over the mission, value, and purpose of higher education.

A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 61% of Americans believe higher education is headed in the wrong direction -- that a college education is no longer a good value. The reasons cited most were high tuition costs and that students are not getting the skills they need for the workplace.

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Let me be clear, a traditional two-year or four-year degree is not the right choice for every student. However, the value of higher education – and the value of the UNG experience – are much greater than a diploma.

We prepare students to think critically and to serve and to lead in their communities – to be problem solvers. As a result, our graduates have a competitive edge that leads to unique job opportunities and higher earnings in many cases.

I am proud that UNG offers an exceptional educational experience and value to our students. We stand out as a leading regional, public university, and we are becoming stronger each year.

We all know that state funding has declined since the recession, and you need to know that legislators and others expect us to continue efforts to be more efficient with the state resources we receive.

That said, we have advocated successfully for UNG as an institution where enrollment is growing and as one with an astounding record of success in recent years.

For this year's budget we received an increase of nearly \$7 million in our state appropriation. The increase, which is based mainly on growth in credit hour production and enrollment, made it possible to provide merit increases to eligible employees and to dedicate approximately \$1 million for faculty and staff equity adjustments this year.

We have invested nearly \$19 million in our faculty and staff through strategic equity adjustments and merit increases every year since consolidation.

In addition to the merit increase provided for eligible employees by the state in July, we self-funded a merit increase this past January. We were one of only seven USG institutions to do so.

This summer, I received a note from a long-time faculty member at our Gainesville Campus. He wrote, "I just want to thank you all for the biggest pay raise of my 32-year career. It far surpassed anything expected, and I'm especially appreciative of the individual merit raise. That means so much to me. Far more importantly, thank you so much for the honor of teaching at UNG. It is such a blessing to have a job which I love."

I am overjoyed that we are making progress for our extraordinary faculty and staff and that we are closing the gap; it was simply what we needed to do. We know that salaries need to remain competitive, and I pledge to you that this continues to be my highest priority.

As a side note, you may have seen news articles this past week about Governor Kemp's direction to state agencies to prepare for budget cuts. Currently, that direction exempts university enrollment-based budgets. While it may impact some institutions that have programs directly funded by the legislature or special funding initiatives, we do not

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expect it to impact UNG. However, we will be cautious in managing our budget this year in case that should change.

Separate from the state allocation for our operating budget, the state provided \$15.9 million this year in capital project funds for the renovations to the former Lanier Technical College Campus and the planning and design of a new facility for UNG's Mike Cottrell College of Business.

I am thankful to Gov. Kemp and our legislators, the Board of Regents, Regent Philip Wilheit, Chancellor Wrigley, and the USG staff for their continued support and investment in UNG.

We are also enormously grateful to Mike Cottrell, whose additional \$10 million private commitment leveraged state support for the new Cottrell Center for Business, Technology & Innovation.

Mike and Lynn Cottrell are longtime supporters of UNG, and their philanthropy has transformed the university, the College of Business, and the opportunities available to our students.

In addition to that gift, our Advancement division has worked with the Swanson family to secure gifts in support of our proposed STEM facility and for renovations to the Howard Milton Stewart Center for Continuing Education in Dahlonega.

We are grateful to them and other donors who recognize the impact we are making on students and future generations and who support our mission.

Most of you know that another of my top priorities has been to raise money for merit and need-based scholarship funds to help attract and support students. We raised more than \$1.6 million last year, an increase of 254% since 2012. And, thanks to the continued growth in our endowment, we were able to award \$1.9 million in scholarships to students – a record for our institution.

I especially appreciate your support and contributions to the UNG Foundation. We received over \$245,000 in gifts from UNG faculty and staff through this past year's Blue and Gold Campaign. Your giving helps provide the margin of excellence for student support and operational needs that fall outside of state support. Give yourselves a round of applause.

While I am talking about finances, let me touch on the issue of affordability. This, of course, is of great concern to students and their families who have taken on a greater share of the cost as state support has declined.

In Georgia, state appropriations comprised 75% of our funding formula in the 1990s, but they make up less than 50% of that formula today. While state funding as measured by expenditures per FTE is recovering, it has not met the funding levels of the early 2000s.

This is true across most of the nation and is highlighted by news stories and political campaigns that frequently emphasize escalating student debt. It is an important topic.

The data is clear that students who leave college for financial reasons are less likely to return and complete their degrees than those who leave for academic reasons.

Our Board of Regents remains committed to affordability and minimizing tuition increases, and UNG has made great progress in reducing student debt through scholarship support, our Student Money Management Center, an increasing number of low-cost textbooks, and our emphasis on 15-to-Finish.

Also, through our Quality Enhancement Plan, we have increased the number of advisors to create a blended advising model, and it is making an impact. In addition to students having a better understanding of their plans of study, our retention and progression rates have improved, helping students graduate on time and on target.

Our efforts have garnered consistent national attention from Forbes, Kiplinger, and U.S. News & World Report, which ranked UNG No. 1 in the South and No. 2 among all public regional universities in the nation for the least amount of student debt. In a nutshell, student debt at many institutions is increasing, but we are holding the line. Thank you.

U.S. News also highlighted UNG last year as being one of the most innovative universities in the South. I attribute that to your work in so many areas to enhance the educational experience for our students, which has been supported in part by the Presidential Incentive Awards program.

We launched that program in 2013 to invest in our faculty and staff whose research and scholarly work have a direct impact on instruction and educational experiences for our students and innovations that improve professional practices.

Since then, we have awarded more than \$1.3 million through a competitive, peer-review process.

Your research has enhanced your teaching and leadership, resulted in publications, and increased research productivity, often funded by external grants.

Chris Seminack of our Institute for Environmental and Spatial Analysis, is a great example of this. He received a Presidential Summer Incentive Award for his research of tidal inlets. He served on a research team with David Patterson, assistant professor in biology, who also won a Presidential Summer Incentive Award and authored a successful grant proposal worth nearly \$30,000 from National Geographic Society. He also co-authored an article published in the Journal of Sedimentary Research. That kind of synergy and collaboration is exactly what I envisioned would happen when we started this program.

Overall, our research productivity has doubled since 2014, and last year, you submitted 59 proposals for external grants totaling more than \$11 million and received awards for nearly \$4 million. That is a wonderful success rate!

To support you further, I am adding an additional \$30,000 to the Presidential Incentive Awards and will award more than \$415,000 this year. The Office of Research and Engagement will distribute program details later this fall, and I encourage you to bring your best ideas forward.

This fall, we are embarking on our strategic planning process, and this is an opportunity to write our future. As I noted in an email to you last week, there is much work to be done that will require strong leadership and engagement at all levels. Thank you to Susann Doyle-Portillo, of the Department of Psychological Science, and Jim Conneely, Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, for leading this important work.

UNG's enrollment has grown about 45% since fall 2012, the semester our consolidation was announced. As we enter strategic planning, it is also important to develop a strategic enrollment management plan to continue to manage our growth and implement strategies for a changing student population.

We are fortunate to be located in the fastest-growing area of the state, and we have worked hard to maintain a strong brand that attracts talented students. However, we know there always will be challenges.

The Southern Regional Education Board – which by the way is led by UNG Alumnus Stephen Pruitt – is projecting that declines in birthrates will result in a slow-down in school and college enrollments by the early 2030s.

This enrollment cliff has already hit some of our other USG institutions. We know it has also dramatically impacted other states, many of which are now actively recruiting students from our area.

This results in increasingly blurred state boundaries for public universities, including UNG, as we now offer out-of-state tuition waivers for students in border counties in Tennessee and North Carolina.

At UNG, we are taking steps to better serve a more diverse student population, including increased diversity recruitment initiatives and offering Parent and Family Orientation sessions in Spanish.

We know, too, that many of our students face a variety of socio-economic challenges and we are working to provide wrap-around support to students that help them stay in school. This might be a Nighthawks emergency loan that helps a student manage a short-term financial challenge or even providing food from one of our campus food pantries.

Also for several years, Gainesville students have requested health services on that campus, and I am excited to share that in January, we will open a new Student Health Center in Gainesville.

Another new facility coming online soon is our new standalone Blue Ridge Campus. We opened our current site in Blue Ridge in 2015 with about 20 students. This fall, we are expecting more than 180 students!

We are very grateful to Speaker David Ralston, Senator Steve Gooch and the General Assembly, and the USG for their support of this new facility, which will open next fall.

Sandy Ott and the team in Blue Ridge have done an amazing job. While we welcome our part-time students, our Blue Ridge Scholars program is designed for full-time students, allowing them to focus on school. Data indicate that full-time students are more likely to persist and reduce college debt, and we are working to increase scholarship support for that program each year.

As the program continues to grow, significant partnerships with local agencies have enabled students to integrate service learning with their academic classes. This campus is truly a game-changer for that area by providing convenient access to UNG for many college students, including first-generation students.

Likewise, our Gainesville and Oconee campuses have undertaken initiatives to increase access and opening the P-16 pipeline.

The Gainesville Campus hosted more than 550 7th-grade students for the 2nd annual career fair to introduce them to career opportunities and educational pathways.

At the Oconee Campus, Cyndee Moore and her staff kicked-off the inaugural Nighthawks SOAR program – a successful three-week middle school summer program for economically disadvantaged and ESL students from the surrounding community.

Our Cumming Campus, led by Jason Pruitt, now serves more than 1,200 students and continues to grow. We are looking at opportunities to expand our academic programs and to add another building on that campus.

We know we need more four-year programs in Cumming, and we are adding programs that will allow students to complete a bachelor's degree there.

All of these programs enjoy strong collaboration with community and educational partners who share our interest in promoting educational attainment, and we are grateful to them.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the concerns cited about the value of higher education is the perceived quality of graduates – that their skills may not measure up to workforce expectations. This is an area where UNG truly shines.

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Like going to the moon, I believe higher education is an investment in the power of ideas and an investment in human potential. Our students are exceptional and they seek a degree that opens new doors and an experience that broadens their horizons. I am proud that we are providing those opportunities.

As an example, John Blessing, a first-generation student at our Gainesville Campus, initially did not believe he would be able to go to college. Last year, he became our first-ever Truman Scholar, one of the most prestigious nationally competitive scholarships for graduate school.

Caroline Brown won the NSF graduate research fellowship worth \$134,000 and has been accepted to the biochemistry program at Yale.

I'll give you one more example – Melissa Silva came to UNG through the Realizing Inspiring Successful Educators, or RISE, program, a partnership between the Hall County Schools and our College of Education to help develop more Spanish-speaking teachers.

As a RISE student, the Hall County School System paid Melissa's tuition while she worked as a paraprofessional with elementary school English learners. She became the program's first graduate a few days ago and is receiving a job offer from Hall County. But first – as a Fulbright recipient – she is going to the Kyrgyz Republic for a year as an English Teaching Assistant.

UNG students earned over \$482,000 in nationally competitive scholarships last year and we remain a national top-producer of Fulbright and Gilman award winners.

Several of those students are members of our Corps of Cadets, and these awards and international internships help prepare them for global leadership opportunities. As The Military College of Georgia, the Corps of Cadets is a signature part of UNG and who we are.

We commissioned 107 cadets as second lieutenants this year, making a significant contribution to U.S. national security. We are also the primary provider of officers for the Georgia Army National Guard. Our graduates serve all over the world, including Afghanistan and Iraq.

Notably, alumnus General Stephen J. Townsend, who is a four-star general, assumed command of U.S. Africa Command in July.

Closer to home, our Ranger Challenge Team competed at the International Sandhurst Military Skills Competition at West Point in April. The team finished third in this world competition out of 49 teams and was the #1 ROTC team in the nation.

This week, we have more than 200 new cadets in training through "FROG Week," as they assimilate into the Corps of Cadets.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome Col. Joe Matthews, a 1994 graduate, as our new commandant. Welcome back to UNG, Col. Matthews.

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In the College of Health Sciences and Professions, our clinical mental health graduates maintained a 100% national licensure pass rate for the sixth straight year, and our nursing graduates had an impressive 95% pass rate on their national licensure exam. This year, that college will continue to grow its graduate programs with 13 students in our inaugural Doctor of Nursing Practice cohort.

In the Mike Cottrell College of Business, we launched new degree programs to address market needs. These include a Supply Chain and Logistics concentration, a bachelor's in cybersecurity, and a master's of accountancy.

Our UNG team placed third among 377 schools—just behind Oregon State and Georgia Tech in the NSA Codebreaker Challenge. This was a very competitive competition and we can take pride in their success.

Similarly, our College of Education is doing an amazing job preparing teachers. In a new statewide measure of the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs, UNG has excelled with the highest-possible scores.

This strong performance shows that our programs are helping develop highly prepared teacher leaders who can advance the field of education.

University College has revised the former General Studies degree into a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies, which is designed to attract returning students, particularly adult learners who need the flexibility of a more individualized major. Currently, one-third of the students pursuing this degree are 25 or older.

The College of Science and Mathematics has expanded its bachelor's degrees in Chemistry and the Biochemistry Concentration, both of which are approved by the American Chemical Society, so that they can now be completed on the Gainesville Campus.

In the College of Arts and Letters, our Public Safety Academy graduated its first class this spring. These graduates are able to enter the job market as national-certified law enforcement officers without the delay of additional training that criminal justice majors from other schools have.

Our colleges and institutes are doing fantastic work. Let's give these administrators and faculty a round of applause.

Other areas, also, are helping UNG students excel. Like the Center for Global Engagement, which is beginning a two-year project to become part of the American Council on Education's Internationalization Lab to update our internationalization plan. Steven Lloyd and Sheila Schulte will co-chair the steering committee for the Internationalization Lab at UNG.

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Our athletics program had great success this year, too. We won conference championships in women's basketball, softball, and baseball and individual conference championships in rifle and track and field.

Women's basketball went on to its first NCAA Southeast Regional Championship and advanced to its first-ever Elite 8 appearance.

Women's tennis also advanced out of the regional round of the NCAA tournament and advanced to the Elite 8 for the first time in program history.

With 59 Peach Belt Conference Academic honorees this year, it is clear that our scholar-athletes have the determination and leadership to excel in the classroom, as well as on the field or on the court.

As talented as our students are, they don't achieve these sorts of outcomes alone. You have heard me say many times that our employees are the best you will find anywhere. Our facilities and grounds are beautifully landscaped and maintained, our campuses are safe learning environments, we have a wonderful commitment to customer service, you lift one another up, and you serve as amazing mentors to our students – all hallmarks of excellence.

This creates an environment and experience that not only encourages, but unleashes, students' potential as scholars and leaders. That is who we are and what we do. That is why we say that UNG leads.

I met with new faculty at orientation last week, and I loved seeing their enthusiasm and look forward to what they will bring to our community. There is one other new faculty member that I would like to welcome to UNG.

Former Governor Nathan Deal was named by the Board of Regents as a Regents Professor earlier this year, and he will begin teaching at UNG this fall through the Department of Political Science and International Affairs. In addition to Governor Deal's work with students in the classroom, we look forward to creating opportunities at all campuses for him to share his life experiences as a U.S. Congressman and a two-term governor with the broader university community. I hope you will join me in welcoming him as you see him around campus.

As we answer the question of: "Is college really worth it?" the answer is a resounding yes. It is important for us to tell that story, to demonstrate the role that UNG plays in our region and beyond.

We know that about 80% of our current students come from a 30-county area in northeast Georgia. We also know that about 75% of our alumni continue to live and work in this region.

As a regional, multi-campus university, we have a real impact on educational attainment and economic development, and we take that responsibility seriously.

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Northeast Georgia is a fast-growing area of the state that includes some of the most affluent, high-population counties as well as very rural communities where the college attainment levels are lower than 20%.

We know that increased educational attainment contributes to healthier communities, higher levels of civic engagement, and higher lifetime earnings.

The research shows that associate degrees pay bring 18 percent more in wages than a high school credential and that bachelor's degree have an even higher wage premium — 71 percent more than a high school credential.

To emphasize the growing career opportunities and educational requirements in our region, our 2nd annual Regional Education and Economic Development Summit in September will feature Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan as the keynote speaker. The event brings together students, educators, and industry and community leaders to highlight the high-demand business-related career opportunities and educational pathways in cybersecurity, supply chain management, and financial technology, among other topics.

Given our regional footprint and the fact that most of our graduates remain in the region, we know that what we do at UNG—what we teach, what we study, and what we create—is inseparable from the communities we serve.

What you do – each and every one of you – makes a difference in the lives of our students and in our communities.

Our vision is that the University of North Georgia will be a regional and national leader for academic excellence, engagement, educational opportunity, and leadership development.

There is still work to be done in achieving this vision, and I encourage you to engage in our strategic planning process this year to keep our work focused on that vision and meet the challenges of the future.

At the same time, know that our progress over the past few years has been astounding. You bring your energy, skill and resourcefulness to UNG and our students every day. As a team, as a university, we have symbolically walked on the moon and even grabbed a few stars. It's amazing what you have done to move this university forward and to create opportunities for students.

I never dreamed we could get this far so quickly. You are exceptional. Thank you and have a wonderful year!