

**State of the University  
University of North Georgia  
President Bonita C. Jacobs  
August 10, 2020**

Good morning and welcome to our Fall 2020 Faculty-Staff Convocation Day. Thank you for being here.

While I wish we could all be together in-person, I have been very encouraged by the high levels of participation in the virtual town hall meetings that we have had over the past months, and I am glad that we can gather virtually today.

The State of the University address is always an important time for us to stop and reflect on our achievements and to discuss the year ahead. Given all that we have faced over the past several months and the challenges ahead of us, this year brings an even greater significance to this event.

Let me start by acknowledging the concerns I know many of us have about resuming campus-based operations and face-to-face instruction this fall. Over the past several months, individuals have experienced unforeseen fear, anxiety, anger, loneliness, and high levels of ambiguity.

Needless to say, this is a very complex situation that has challenged us all. We are providing a campus-based experience with as much flexibility as possible for as many people as possible. The situation remains quite fluid, and our operations may have to adapt over time to changing conditions.

While we cannot eliminate the risk of COVID-19, everyone can help mitigate the risk ... don't come to campus if you are sick or if you have been directly exposed to someone with the virus, social distance, wash your hands, and, of course, wear a mask. These are all necessary steps to maintaining a healthy and safe environment for all of us to live, work and learn. Now is not the time to become complacent about the safety measures we should take to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

While faculty and staff collectively contributed to our successful transition to remote instruction and our preparations for fall, I want to take a moment to highlight the work of a few units that spent countless hours behind the scenes to ensure our success and they deserve important recognition.

- Our Office of Distance Education and Technology Integration – helped approximately 20,000 students and 1,000 faculty to cross the finish line in the spring semester, and then they immediately began helping to put all summer courses online.
- The Center for Teaching, Learning and Leadership led the research and compilation of faculty and staff support materials during the transition to online instruction and remote work last spring.

- Financial Aid, Business Services, and the Grants Office secured and distributed \$6.8 million in CARES Act funding to students through automatic and emergency grants.
- The Student Connections Program – a collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and Enrollment Management – mobilized student workers to reach out to students online to identify concerns and minimize withdrawals in spring and summer.
- Information Technology, Human Resources, and Business Services are implementing new systems to support remote learning and working.
- Academic Affairs has trained more than 500 additional faculty in the delivery of fully online courses, and about 200 new online course templates have been developed.
- Our Public Safety staff has secured and distributed thousands of PPE materials and other resources to promote safety on our campuses.
- Facilities staff have cleaned and modified classrooms and spaces, improved air handling systems, and installed safety equipment where appropriate.
- Our Food Pantries on all five campuses undertook the difficult task of keeping supplies replenished and continued to serve students and employees.
- The University Relations team has ensured frequent and accurate information to our students, employees, external stakeholders, and the media. They have also coordinated a multitude of virtual events.
- I want to especially thank Dr. Jamie Mitchem, of the Faculty Senate, and Kasi Ives, of the Staff Council, for their strong leadership during this time.

While this list could go on and on, I simply want to share my deepest appreciation to the many members of the UNG community who continue to work tirelessly and constructively to help our institution navigate this challenging situation.

Because so much of our attention is focused on COVID-19, it is important for us to take a few moments to highlight some of the other remarkable achievements of our students, faculty and staff over the past year.

The 2019-2020 academic year was another outstanding year for UNG. Once again we enrolled a record number of students, and our summer enrollment was the highest ever. Our completion rates and graduation rates remain among the top in the state and well above most of our peers in Georgia's state university sector.

Historically, we have been blessed with talented students and growing enrollment, and that does not happen by accident. Our strong brand, our Enrollment Management team, and the exceptional academic and student development experiences contribute to our ongoing success. UNG faculty and staff truly care about our students, and I never underestimate the impact of that personal touch when dealing with concerned and anxious students.

Well before the pandemic, universities across the country were assessing the impact of enrollment decline in the near future due to a decline in birthrates and the number of college students. Other states and regions have already been impacted by this trend and the enrollment market has become much more competitive as a result.

The University System of Georgia's recent enrollment projection report points to a continued moderate growth for UNG of 8.9% – about 1700 students – over the next 10 years, and UNG's projected growth rate is second only to Georgia Tech. We are fortunate that UNG is a high-demand institution. Six USG institutions have projected enrollment declines and many others are projected to grow at less than 3% over the same time period.

To ensure that UNG's enrollment remains strong in the years ahead, we have developed a Strategic Enrollment Management Plan that will be implemented over the next few years with involvement from all areas of the university. You will hear more about this important work in the weeks ahead.

Our history of academic excellence is one of the factors that attracts students to UNG, and this year there were amazing examples that highlight the opportunities that we provide students and faculty.

Through our Center for Cyber Operations Education, UNG students competed with more than 500 schools and won the 2019 NSA Codebreaker Challenge with more than four times the points of the Georgia Tech team that placed second.

Success like this is sure to continue with the development of a new Department of Defense Institute for Cyber Operations at UNG this year. The Institute is the result of a UNG initiative and consortium with the other senior military colleges to secure federal funding in support of cyber education. We anticipate receiving approximately \$1.475 million in federal funding for the institute this year.

The new Master of Accountancy program in the Mike Cottrell College of Business is also producing great results. Susan Harkins, a student in the program, is one of only five students in the country to win a \$5,000 scholarship from the American Institute of CPAs.

Of course, we are very excited this year that we will break ground on the new Cottrell Center for Business, Technology & Innovation, which is scheduled to open in two years and will provide a state-of-the-art education space for the college's students, faculty and staff. We are incredibly grateful to Mike and Lynn Cottrell, whose generosity has had a transformational impact on our university and the opportunities we are able to provide students.

In February, UNG hosted on the Gainesville Campus the Conference of the Americas, an interdisciplinary conference that attracted many USG faculty and students to explore critical socio-cultural, political, economic, and environmental issues relating to Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada. Many thanks to Drs. George and Donna Danna for their leadership in hosting this conference.

One of the highlights of the year was receiving Board of Regents approval for our first PhD program. Pending final approval from SACSCOC, our new online PhD in Criminal Justice will begin next fall to help meet a growing national demand for criminal justice instructors. It also represents a significant benchmark in the growth of our research and graduate programs.

Similarly, our College of Health Sciences & Professions is helping to address a nationwide shortage of health care providers through its highly regarded programs.

First, our nursing department's long-standing reputation for excellence continues to grow with appearances on state and national rankings for top nursing programs, and it earned its first federal Nurse Faculty Loan Program grant that will support graduate nursing students with partially forgivable loans of 25-35 thousand dollars per year. They also welcomed our first cohort into the Doctor of Nursing Practice program last fall.

The Doctorate of Physical Therapy program received full reaccreditation for the next 10 years. Congratulations to Dr. Susan Klappa and her team on this achievement! This program remains one of the most sought after in the state.

Also, the Department of Counseling, for the seventh year in a row, had a 100% pass rate on the National Counselor Examination. Additionally, when we transitioned to online instruction in the spring, the department ensured that all interns became certified to provide online counseling, and all graduating students were able to complete their required hours on time.

The College of Science and Mathematics received \$180,000 in grants to enhance and expand their interdisciplinary STEM lab on the Dahlonga Campus. The project will enhance opportunities for students like Amanda Ash and Tyler Wilson, who were awarded Barry Goldwater Scholarships, which, by the way, is the most prestigious national undergraduate STEM award.

The college's faculty and excellent programs continue to prepare graduates for amazing careers and graduate student opportunities. This year two alumni of the biology program – Katie McCullough and Cory Duckworth – were awarded NSF Graduate Research Fellowships, each worth up to \$134,000. These are life-changing experiences and strong resume-builders for these students!

Our Nationally Competitive Scholarship Program, the Center for Global Engagement and our faculty and staff continue to connect students with transformational scholarships and intern experiences. For the third year in a row, UNG was named as a top-producing institution for the Fulbright program, and I might add, we were the only one in Georgia to do so. This year, we have 5 Fulbright awardees and 2 alternates, including our first Fulbright graduate grant and also a student who first began at UNG's Blue Ridge Campus and will teach English in Taiwan.

A total of 27 UNG students – a record number – were selected for Gilman scholarships this year. The Gilman awards funding to Pell-eligible students who plan to study abroad for at least 3 weeks. Like other scholarships, Gilman is allowing students who had summer and/or fall study abroad start dates to defer programs to start in January and beyond.

Three students who are members of UNG's Chinese Flagship Program, including one cadet, have won the Boren Scholarship, which pays up to \$20,000 for students to spend up to a full academic year to study less commonly taught languages in world regions critical to U.S. interests.

Our military program also had a tremendously successful year and won the MacArthur Award as the #1 senior military college in the nation for the second time in three years.

Our cadets also won the Spartan Ranger Challenge for a third-straight year and earned the right to send two teams to compete in the International Sandhurst competition at West Point. While the competition was cancelled due to the pandemic, our teams were poised for yet another additional win.

We will commission over 100 officers for the fourth year in a row, and we must not lose sight of what that means. We are preparing these students to lead as military officers in a complex global environment, and our graduates are exceptionally well prepared to serve.

UNG has produced numerous general officers, and we learned recently that Major General Paul Calvert has been approved for a promotion and will assume leadership of the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, which coordinates military efforts against ISIL. He is the third UNG graduate to be assigned this critical mission.

The UNG Athletics program continues to produce leaders in the classroom and on the fields and courts. Our 225+ student-athletes carried a record cumulative 3.26 grade point average. Kylee Smith was named the Academic All-America of the Year award for Division II softball, and she became UNG's first-ever Academic All-America of the Year award winner.

Our teams made three NCAA postseason appearances, prior to the virus ending the season prematurely. They had three All-Americans and 20 All-Conference honors, including four conference Players of the Year.

We have made great strides to improve our athletic facilities over the past several years, and a generous \$1 million gift from Lynn and Mike Cottrell has funded the first phase of improvements to our softball, baseball and soccer complex, now named Cottrell Park.

In recognition of these and many other achievements, Lindsay Reeves was named an NCAA Division II Athletic Directors of the Year for the second time in her career. We have been very fortunate to have her leadership.

Our student-athletes are also committed to service. UNG won the Peach Belt Conference's LeeAnn Noble Make-A-Wish Award for the eleventh straight year after donating almost \$14,000 that they raised for the annual initiative.

Service is one of UNG's core values. We define it as giving of oneself to enhance the life and richness of our university and all of its members, as well as for the larger community.

This year, we received re-affirmation of UNG's Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. Across all of our campuses, there are amazing examples of academic and community engagement that make our university and region stronger.

For example, we have a strong partnership with the Junior Achievement Discovery Center of Northeast Georgia in Cumming, and our Cumming Campus was recognized for the number of volunteers and hours UNG provided to the for the Discovery Center's student programs.

At Blue Ridge, where Sandy Ott and her team are preparing to open their new standalone campus in just a few short days, the "Blue Ridge Scholars Program" is entering its fifth year of educating the next generation of community leaders. This year students in the scholars program will read to 2nd graders in Fannin County Schools to encourage young people to be excited about reading.

In Oconee, students are assisting Susan Brantley and Dr. Gary Adcox in expanding the Oconee Community Garden to integrate a pollinator research project for biology courses along with the edible plants that help support the campus's Food Pantry and the community at-large. Susan and Gary were awarded a LEAP grant to help fund this work.

UNG received nearly \$3 million in external grant awards this year, not including CARES Act funding, and I am pleased that, despite our current challenges, faculty continue to seek help from the Office of Grants and Contracts to submit grant applications. In addition to managing UNG's current grant portfolio, the grants office supported the submission of more than \$14 million in funding proposals.

Our research and scholarship activity has grown significantly over the past several years, and I am impressed by the opportunities our faculty and staff are seeking. One proposal this year made it through the first three screenings for a \$100 million grant through the MacArthur Foundation 100 and Change program. While the proposal was not successful this time, it certainly sets the stage for many other opportunities.

Many of the grants being pursued now began as projects funded through the Presidential Incentive Awards program I started in 2013. Since then, we have invested more than \$1.7 million in faculty and staff research and scholarly work. Last year, 38 projects received more than \$360,000.

Because some projects this year were interrupted due to the pandemic, we plan to re-award funds as we are able to do so to support project completion. We are studying the budget, and I am optimistic that, while we may not be able to provide as much funding as in previous years, we will be able to continue with the Presidential Incentive Awards. These are important endeavors that directly enhance your expertise and our students' educational experiences and innovations that improve professional practices.

Our university commitment to student success takes many forms, and it is particularly important to address the needs of first-generation students. With more than 20% of our students identifying as first-generation students, this fall we are launching UNG Gen 1, a mentoring program that connects them with first-generation faculty and staff for formalized

mentoring relationships. This initiative will begin on the Gainesville Campus with almost 40 mentoring pairs already participating.

Also, UNG has become the first institution in Georgia to establish a chapter of Alpha Alpha Alpha, an honor society for first-generation college students that promotes academic excellence, provides opportunities for personal growth and leadership development, as well as campus and community service. Thank you to Jennifer Herring, Dr. Alyson Paul, and Dr. Carol Adams for your leadership on these important initiatives in Gainesville.

Also in Gainesville, we are excited that renovations will soon be complete on the former Lanier Technical College facility that is now part of the Gainesville Campus. The much-needed expansion will support enrollment and program growth, and it's about time we get that finished.

Adjacent to that site, is the 77-acre Tumbling Creek property, where we plan to develop the first student-focused housing adjacent to the Gainesville Campus. I want to commend our faculty for collaborating with the UNG Real Estate Foundation to ensure that the development of the property occurs in a smart and sustainable way that will preserve the majority of the property in a natural state for student recreation and academic use.

We are committed to supporting the plan developed through this collaboration, and will invest in enhanced trails and a new outdoor lab space for instruction and research. The outdoor lab will be a unique facility that facilitates instruction, study, and research for biology, ecology, and geology – while being just a few hundred steps away from the Science Building and central campus.

Our stature as a regional university continues to rise through our world-class faculty and staff, academic excellence, and our commitment to students. Publications like U.S. News, Money magazine, and Kiplinger routinely rank UNG among the top colleges in Georgia and in the nation for affordability, academic excellence, and value. However, we know that many of our students still face financial barriers.

Raising money for scholarships has been one of my top priorities as president, and we have raised more than \$12 million for scholarships since 2012, including \$1.7 million this past year. This year, the UNG Foundation awarded \$2.4 million to more than 1900 students. We all know that many students need this important funding to remain enrolled.

A highlight of this year was a \$1 million gift from Chantal and Tommy Bagwell to create a scholarship that awards \$5,000 per year to 40 UNG students who reside in Forsyth County or Hall County or who went to high school in one of those communities.

The UNG Foundation raised more than \$16 million in new gifts and pledges this year and increased the Foundation's endowment to almost \$65 million. This is a testament to and the hard work of Vice President Jeff Tarnowski, the UNG Foundation, and our development team.

Because of the loyalty and generosity of our alumni and friends – and many of you – we have removed financial barriers for many of our students. I want to publicly thank each of you and assure you that your support is having an enormous impact on the lives of our students and on the university.

I have covered a long list of accomplishments from the past year and have barely scratched the surface. What is behind all of these achievements? The common element is our team of outstanding faculty, administrators, and staff who are driven to help our students fulfill their potential, driven to serve others and improve the quality of life around the world, and driven to create a brighter future for communities near and far.

Because of your hard work and dedication, the University of North Georgia is reaching new heights of excellence in fulfilling our mission. You should be proud of all that you have accomplished and of the many lives you have touched personally. Thank you for all that you are doing to make this university the very best it can be.

This will be a challenging year for all universities, and I want to be realistic with you about our challenges and how we will respond to them.

The cost of higher education has not decreased since this pandemic; it has increased. While we have received federal and state resources to provide some support as we manage the effects of COVID-19, we have also had to draw on our institutional resources. Additionally, we are facing one of the most significant state budget cuts in history, and there was no increase in tuition or fees.

As a state university, we remain committed to providing students an affordable, high-quality educational experience. We are fortunate that, unlike many other institutions, we have been able to maintain student demand and to provide financial stability for our employees.

As we resume campus-based operations in the safest manner possible, we must all be diligent about following health and safety protocols to ensure continuity of operations. Not having students on campus would result in revenue loss that would jeopardize our ability to maintain our workforce. The pandemic has been disruptive to our work, but it has highlighted our agility, resiliency and innovation. We must continue to be resourceful and nimble to meet our financial challenges.

These past several months, punctuated by incidents of police brutality and social unrest across our nation, have brought new attention to the issue of racism. This is an issue that many people find uncomfortable to discuss, but it is one that we cannot ignore. The senseless killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and others across the country have incited understandable and widespread pain, anger and frustration about racism and violence against Blacks.

With leadership from our Diversity Council, UNG made a formal commitment to diversity in 2016 that connects directly to our mission. We know that a diverse and inclusive educational experience helps prepare our students to lead in a complex, global society. That experience requires us to ensure that every member of our North Georgia community feels safe, respected and supported. Since then, we have taken a number of actions to support that commitment, and I would like to highlight a few of them.

- Our new recruitment initiatives have resulted in a 22.7% increase in applications from students of color since 2017.



- Faculty in the College of Education have established multiple externally-funded programs to recruit and prepare minority students to become educators, and they have selected Dr. Lauren Johnson as Assistant Dean for Diversity to coordinate diversity training within the college.
- This year, we have been awarded a grant through USG's African American Male Initiative.
- Through collaborative efforts across the university, we are reviewing recruitment, hiring and training practices to help diversify university faculty and staff.
- In 2015, I established the position of Advisor to the President on Diversity, and, in 2019, we broadened the responsibilities and hired Dr. Pablo Mendoza as Director for Diversity and Inclusion. In that role, he provides leadership and advances diversity and inclusion efforts across the university. This year, he will lead the development of a Diversity Action Plan for UNG.

I read an article recently that suggested three zones of action – the Head, the Heart and the Hands. These are important as we consider how to promote equity and inclusion. With our heads, we can learn about perspectives and experiences other than our own. With our hearts, we can affirm and care for marginalized members of our community without defensiveness. With our hands, we can take meaningful actions that address injustice, celebrate diversity in our community, and promote unity with one another.

These conversations and actions require vulnerability, courage and respect, and I believe UNG is keenly equipped to address these issues in ways that make a positive difference on our campuses and in our communities.

With a growing list of challenges and opportunities awaiting us, it is important for our strategic planning process to identify new goals and aspirations, to imagine how much farther we can go, and to provide a roadmap for us to get there. We embarked on a university-wide strategic planning process last year; however, our environment has changed in dramatic ways since then, and participation in the process understandably diminished this spring and summer.

Our Strategic Plan Committee co-chairs – Dr. Susann Doyle-Portillo and Dr. Jim Conneely – have recommended, and I concur, that we pause that work to provide an opportunity to refocus our attention, assess the work done so far, and to provide more time to engage members of our university community, as well as external stakeholders in our planning process. I am very grateful to Susann, Jim and all of the committee members for their work, and I look forward to the process resuming later this year.

In times of adversity, our values help guide us and underscore who we are and what we stand for. I am justifiably proud that through this year's uncertain events, UNG's core values—excellence, student-focus, integrity, engagement, and service—have shone brightly throughout our communities.

I have seen these values demonstrated in the creativity and resiliency of our students, alumni, faculty and staff; selfless commitment and service to those in need in our communities; and your love, respect and care for one another. I am confident that our commitment to our core values will define our actions and carry us forward.

Unlike many other institutions across the country, we are in a position of strength. As we enter this academic year, we do so knowing that we are prepared this fall to fulfill our mission in extraordinary circumstances.

The days ahead may not be easy, but the University of North Georgia is strong, and I am optimistic about our future. I am grateful for the invaluable support and leadership from so many in our university community.

I take my role as president of this fine institution very seriously. We face challenges ahead, but I pledge to be transparent, to keep you informed and to keep the best interests of the university in mind.

Thank you, again, for your devotion to excellence. I am profoundly grateful to each of you for what we are able to achieve together.

I wish you all a safe and healthy semester filled with success.

Thank you.

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