

Congratulations to all of today's award recipients. We are pleased to recognize your work and celebrate your contributions to the UNG community.

It is great to see everyone and to kick-off the new academic year. Before we proceed, I especially want to welcome the new faculty and staff who are with us today. If you have joined us since last August, please stand so that we can welcome you.

I want to begin by acknowledging the tremendous challenges of the past 18 months. Since early 2020, the COVID pandemic has been an unprecedented and prolonged trial that has taken a physical, social and emotional toll on most of us. The pandemic has affected each person differently, and it is important that we acknowledge and respect each person's experience and the impact on our students as well as the university. It also critical that we keep pressing forward.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize the tireless work already conducted during the pandemic to help UNG continue serving our students with safety top of mind. In particular, I want to thank, the Faculty Senate and Staff Council leadership, whose collaboration and counsel have been instrumental over the past 18 months.

Scores of faculty and staff contributed to the development and implementation of safety and mitigation plans; transitioned courses, programming and services online; and ensured access to COVID tests and vaccines. It would be impossible to recognize everyone, but we asked a few key leaders to reflect on this past year.

[VIDEO]

As we reflect on the achievements of the past year, I should add that:

- Our custodial staff was consistently on the front line, keeping classrooms and campus spaces clean, sanitized and safe.
- Enrollment Management and Academic Affairs implemented a new withdrawal intervention process that helped students stay enrolled. Staffed by members of Academic Affairs, University College, Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, the program affected more than 3,000 students and earned the "Creative Collaboration: Institutional Impact Award" from the Higher Education Case Manager Association.
- Our Financial Aid office distributed more than \$10 million in COVID relief aid to students to help them remain enrolled.
- We launched a mental health initiative, in partnership with the USG, to help students connect with resources and services that complement our Student Counseling Centers.

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- Student Health Services stepped up to provide almost 2,000 COVID-19 tests to symptomatic students, faculty and staff last year, and they administered—with critical support from our Nursing department—almost 1600 vaccines in the spring.
- Public Safety, Student Affairs and Health Services staffed asymptomatic testing and vaccine clinics to serve the UNG community, and we partnered with the Department of Public Health to provide a public mass vaccination site at the Gainesville Campus.
- Our IT teams equipped all classrooms with technology for multimodal instruction, supported more than 71,000 Zoom meetings and webinars, managed 31,000 support calls, and developed hundreds of automated workflows to support our work.

I am deeply grateful to each of you for your resilience and creativity in the face of adversity. You have demonstrated repeatedly that, together, we can manage complex problems.

I have heard from students, families and many of you that you welcome the opportunity to return to traditional in-person classes and on-campus experiences. We know the pandemic is not in the rear-view mirror yet, and we should expect there to be continued challenges. However, as I shared with you last year, the way we face our challenges will define who we are.

The recent Olympic Games in Tokyo served as a good reminder of this. One Associated Press article referred to the games as the “Perseverance games,” where the event was “imperfect, but not impossible.”

We saw inspiring examples of tenacity and sportsmanship as athletes like U.S. Olympian and Army Specialist Benard Keter, who helped his competitors off the ground after completing a grueling 3,000-meter steeplechase race in Tokyo’s extreme heat, citing the importance of “taking care of others.”

In another example, American runner Isaiah Jewett fell during a semi-final event when a fellow hurdler accidentally tripped him. The devastating incident dashed his dreams of earning a medal, but he helped his rival get up and they completed the event together.

I know there are so many of you who are supporting and taking care of each other to get through this. I expect the next several months to be “imperfect, but not impossible.”

Our students remain the core of our mission. It is a special responsibility and calling to support our students’ journey – both in and out of the classroom – to realize their potential and prepare them for career success or continued education. I am deeply grateful to each of you for your compassion, your teamwork, your tenacity, and your dedication to our mission.

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In spite of the challenges of last year, we must not lose sight of what we accomplished. UNG's momentum grew, and we achieved impressive success in some key performance indicators: graduation rates, retention, academic excellence, grants and research awards, and fundraising.

For the fiscal year that just ended, UNG awarded 3,200 degrees—an increase of 37% over 2013. Our college completion initiatives and advising programs have been driving factors in this success.

In 2016, UNG selected “On Time and On Target” as our Quality Enhancement Plan for our accreditation reaffirmation. The program included a blended advising model with mandatory advising, advising tools, “Maximize Your Major” sessions at orientation, and a “Master Faculty Advisor Program”.

These transformational elements provided students with consistent and accurate advising tools and information and teaching students to take responsibility for their goals and to use high impact learning opportunities.

Students participating in “On Time and On Target” sought out advising earlier and more often, demonstrated progress in advising-related learning outcomes, and, for baccalaureate students, graduated with fewer excess credit hours than each prior year.

The UNG QEP began with five advisors and a handful of baccalaureate degrees. It now includes 22 baccalaureate majors and 4 non-baccalaureate majors across all campuses, and it will continue to expand as resources allow.

I would like to recognize Terri Carroll and Dr. Eugene VanSickle for their leadership of the QEP and the tremendous efforts made by our Professional and Master Faculty Advisors to achieve this level of success. The QEP's success reflects their time, effort and dedication to our students. Terri, Gene and all of our professional and faculty advisors, please stand so that we can applaud you!

You should know that, in our University System of Georgia sector, UNG outperforms its peers in retention, the associate 3-year graduation rate and the bachelor's 4-year graduation rate, based on the most recent cohorts.

Even more impressive is the fact that UNG outperforms many of our peers in the USG's Comprehensive Universities sector in some of these indicators.

One of the hallmarks of excellence at UNG is our commitment to high-impact practices that support students in achieving their goals of obtaining a degree as well as opportunities beyond UNG, whether for experiences abroad, grad school or research.

I am very pleased that our students have not been deterred in their efforts to pursue nationally competitive awards and research opportunities, despite the uncertainty of applying during a pandemic.

Seven students won Fulbright Awards and 11 others were semi-finalists. UNG was named a national Top Producer of Fulbrights for the fourth consecutive year.

In addition, we had our fourth National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship – a very impressive opportunity that carries a monetary value of up to \$138,000.

Overall, last year, UNG students earned more than \$535,000 in awards for nationally competitive scholarships and paid summer research internships. Congratulations to Dr. Anastasia Lin and Dr. Victoria Hightower and all of our other faculty and staff mentors who helped guide these students to success.

Our Corps of Cadets and their advisors also deserve kudos for strong performances last year. UNG commissioned more than 100 officers for the 6th year in a row. Of those commissioning, 24 cadets earned recognition as Distinguished Military Students, 9 earned the honor of Distinguished Military Graduates, and two of them were in the top 10% of all Army cadets in the United States.

In addition, the corps' Ranger Challenge Team won best ROTC unit for the third time in four years, and they won the third-straight ROTC title in the international Sandhurst Military Skills Competition at West Point, defeating the other five senior military colleges in the U.S. and all other Army ROTC programs.

Congratulations to the Military Science Department, Col. Joe Matthews and the Commandant's Office and for their outstanding work to develop our future military leaders!

Likewise, Athletics had a banner year with softball going to the NCAA DII championships in Denver, a national pole-vaulting championship, and a record 155 athletes on the Peach Belt Conference Presidential Honor Roll. Congratulations to Mary Rob Plunkett and our coaches and athletes!

Never underestimate the importance of faculty and staff mentoring to our students' success!

While the pandemic caused significant disruptions to research and other grant-funded activities, UNG maintained its momentum in both proposal activity and the number of active awards. The number of active awards at UNG has increased by more than 20 percent in the past four years, and the annual grant award amounts have increased about 74 percent in the same time.

The Presidential Incentive Awards program remains a strong priority to seed faculty and staff research. Since 2013, we have awarded nearly \$2.3 million through this program. Despite the pandemic, faculty and staff were able to meet most of the goals set forth within their original proposals this past year, and we were able to carry forward funding to enable those who were not able to complete the 2020 awards.

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If you have at any time received a Presidential Incentive Award, please stand so that we can recognize you.

Increasing external grants is important to your research, and I remain impressed by your work. Grants are also a significant way that UNG can support the communities we serve, as illustrated by the \$1.45 million grant the Office of Government Relations and Economic Development and UNG's Center for Entrepreneurship received from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Appalachian Regional Commission.

The grant aims to align workforce development efforts with existing economic development strategies in rural communities, and we are working with six area school districts to grow entrepreneurship education, help students develop the professional skills employers desire, and to encourage continued education.

As a growing regional university, UNG plays a vital role in supporting the economic growth of the state. Our Regional Education and Economic Development—or REED—initiative continues to gain traction in reducing educational barriers and building partnerships that enhance our academic programs and career opportunities for our graduates.

On September 9, we will host the fourth annual REED Summit to bring together educators, students and civic and professional leaders to highlight high demand career opportunities and the educational pathways that support them.

This year's summit will focus on trends and opportunities in the public service sector, including government, military criminal justice, cybersecurity and nonprofit administration. Kudos to Bobbi Larson and Ben Jarrard and our academic partners for your work in this area!

While UNG remains nationally recognized for affordability and value, one of the barriers to education for many students in our area is cost. As most of you know, raising funds for scholarships has been one of my top priorities since taking office, and I am pleased that our fundraising success continues to grow.

The UNG Foundation has raised \$14.9 million for student scholarships since 2012, and the UNG Foundation awarded \$3.2 million in scholarships to more than 4,000 students last year, including more than \$450,000 in emergency student COVID relief. For perspective, five years ago, the Foundation awarded about half that amount to 1,200 students.

Despite significant restrictions on alumni and donor events, Jeff Tarnowski and the University Advancement team increased the number of alumni donors by 3.5% last year, reaching the highest number of alumni gifts in the past 5 years.

The total assets of the UNG Foundation are now just over \$100 million—a 17 percent increase over last year. The majority of these funds are endowed for scholarships, and the UNG Foundation has 233 endowed scholarship funds created by donors—an increase of 19 percent in the past 5 years.

Endowed scholarships are critical for students and UNG, as they are a predictable revenue source to support student and institutional needs. Jeff, we are very grateful to you and your team for your efforts to support our students and the university!

Modern technology infrastructure and academic facilities are additional elements that are critical to the learning environments that support our students' success and the work of our faculty and staff.

Our IT teams implemented new technology in many computer labs at the Gainesville and Dahlonega campuses and a “managed-print service” for students at all campuses to improve efficiency and reduce waste.

On the facility side, we were very fortunate a few years ago to inherit the facilities formerly occupied by Lanier Technical College. We have completed significant renovations, and those facilities are opening this fall to support and expand educational opportunities for students at our Gainesville Campus.

Each building is just beautiful! The expansion has resulted in state-of-the-art, centralized spaces for nursing, IT, IESA, visual arts, film and digital media, and professional and continuing education.

Bill Moody and his facilities team and the IT team that installed all of the new technology poured blood, sweat and tears into that project, and their commitment shows in every detail. Thank you, all!

We are very pleased that an addition to the academic building in Cumming was finally approved in the state budget this year and, pending continued funding approval, construction should begin next year. I know that is welcome news to Jason Pruitt and the team in Cumming! I am very grateful to our legislative delegation in getting that project approved.

In Dahlonega, the new Cottrell Center for Business, Technology & Innovation is taking shape quickly and will open next fall. As the new home for the Mike Cottrell College of Business, it is poised to provide world-class learning and collaboration spaces for our students, faculty and staff.

One of the fast-growing opportunities for students through the Mike Cottrell College of Business is the UNG's Institute for Cyber Operations. Through UNG's designation as a Senior Military College and in cooperation with the Department of Defense, we received approximately \$1.5 million in federal funds last year to establish the institute, and we will receive approximately \$4 million for the institute through next year.

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The Institute builds upon our previous success with the Center for Cyber Operations Education to help prepare our graduates for the more than 17,000 open cyber-related positions in Georgia in the military, government and corporate sectors. We welcome retired Col. Chris Mitchiner, a UNG alumnus, as the institute's executive director.

Similarly, our Center for Healthy Aging has become the Institute for Healthy Aging, with Dr. Pamela Elfenbein as its director. The Institute oversees UNG's academic gerontology programs to educate and prepare graduates to serve the region's growing senior citizen population. In addition, the Institute has a strong focus on outreach and collaborated with Sandy Ott at our Blue Ridge Campus this year for the PEAKS program, which offered an array of virtual presentations to senior adults across our region.

Another exciting milestone for us is our first Ph.D. program starting this fall. The Ph.D. in Criminal Justice with a concentration in Intelligence was approved last year and will begin its first cohort with 15 students—50 percent more than originally planned.

Other achievements this year that deserve a shout-out are:

- The College of Education's Educator Preparation Programs received a four out of four on their state-wide ratings from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission.
- In January, the U.S. Geospatial Intelligence Foundation accredited our Institute for Environmental and Spatial Analysis undergraduate certificate in Geospatial Intelligence. This made UNG one of only 19 universities in the nation with an accredited program like this.
- We opened our new Astronomical Observatory last fall. It features professional telescopes for astronomy research, and it is one of only four such observatories in Georgia associated with public universities.
- The Oconee Campus is celebrating the 10th anniversary of our partnership with the Oconee Cultural Arts Foundation, a partnership that allows our students to learn and work at OCAF's facility and interact with artists from the community.
- Our pilot program for first-generation students at the Gainesville Campus has proven effective in increasing retention and degree completion. As part of that effort, UNG became the first university in Georgia to establish a Tri-Alpha Honor Society for first-generation students, and we look forward to scaling up this program to other campuses. Thank you, in particular, to Jennifer Herring, Dr. Carol Adams and Dr. Alyson Paul for your leadership on this initiative.

As we look to the future, higher education is experiencing challenges and issues that will drive transformation. Universities have always been centers of innovation and change, but, heaven knows, we do not have a reputation for changing quickly.

In the past year, we have seen rapid and widespread adoption of technology, reductions in state financial support, greater expectations for workforce development, increased compliance requirements.

Last year, we paused our strategic planning process to enable us time to catch our breath from the pandemic and assess how it might affect the university. We are resuming the planning process this fall, under the leadership of Dr. Sue Doyle-Portillo, Department Head for Psychological Science, and Dr. Kate Maine, vice president for university relations and chief of staff. We plan to complete the effort in the spring and begin implementation next year.

We have several complementary planning processes that are wrapping up or are underway.

In 2019, Dr. Sheila Schulte, of UNG's Center for Global Engagement, and Dr. Steven Lloyd, of Academic Affairs, led a 40-member UNG team in the American Council on Education's Internationalization Laboratory to consider strategies to give students a broader view of the world, including the incorporation of more global learning opportunities for students on UNG's campuses.

As a result, we will launch the Global Learning Community this fall in one of the residence halls in Dahlenega. It will pair incoming international students with new U.S. students who have an interest in international affairs. In addition to living alongside each other, these students will take a contemporary global topics course together. Congratulations on developing this exciting new opportunity!

Last year, Dr. Pablo Mendoza, director of Diversity and Inclusion, led a large, multidisciplinary group in the development of a Diversity Action Plan with the goals of: 1) recruiting and retaining diverse students, faculty and staff; 2) fostering an equitable and inclusive campus environment; and 3) supporting policies and programming that promote inclusion, innovation and excellence. These goals require intentional and collaborative work for us to meet our mission.

To establish a baseline for some of the recommendations coming out of the planning process, we will invite students, faculty and staff to participate in a campus climate survey this year. I am grateful to Pablo and the planning committee for their work.

UNG began implementation of a 5-year strategic enrollment management plan last year. The plan is focused on attracting, enrolling and retaining first-time students, cadets, transfer students, adult learners and veterans. To expand UNG's market and increase student diversity, we are also focused on targeted populations, such as out-of-state and international students and students from under-represented groups.

I want to bring special attention to transfer students. Many of you know that my research has focused on transfer students; last year I served on the American Council on Education's National Task Force on the Transfer and Award of Credit.

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Of the 2.8 million students entering college for the first time in fall 2011, more than one million of them—that’s 38 percent—transferred to a different institution at least once within six years.

At UNG, we accept about 1,000 transfer students each year. We have expanded articulation agreements with North Georgia Technical College and Lanier Technical College recently, so that number will likely grow.

Transfer students are valuable assets to our university community, and it is important that we ensure UNG has a transfer-friendly culture that reduces barriers and provides the resources and supports they need to be successful.

Last year, a Transfer Advisory Group identified several ways we might improve support for transfer students throughout the enrollment cycle. We will begin to implement some of their recommendations this year, including a targeted communication plan, a “transfer credit evaluation tool”, enhanced advising, and potential scholarships.

Special thanks go to Dr. Janet Marling, executive director of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, and Dr. Jim Conneely, vice president for student affairs and enrollment management, for their leadership of this initiative, which includes many individuals from other divisions as well. I look forward to seeing the results of their efforts.

Overall, our enrollment projections continue to look good... the University System’s enrollment projections indicate 6.5 percent growth for UNG through 2030. Only half of the USG institutions are projected to grow in that time, and, of those, UNG has the third-highest growth projections.

Overlooking summer 2020 and the effect of the pandemic, our enrollment this summer was up almost 5 percent over 2019, and we expect to welcome about 4,000 new freshmen this fall.

It is clear to me—UNG has a strong foundation and a bright future.

January 2023 will mark UNG’s sesquicentennial—our 150th anniversary. Our celebration will begin next fall and continue through summer 2023. It will be a wonderful time to reflect on our heritage and our impact on this region, while also setting the stage for decades to come. We will announce a planning committee for this effort soon.

As we gear up for fall, know that we have persevered and succeeded as Nighthawks Together. Our success on all fronts has been a team effort. As we navigate this semester and the coming weeks, we continue to monitor the virus impact and to be in regular communication with state and local public health officials. Though not mandated, I encourage everyone to wear face masks while inside campus facilities.

Most importantly, I strongly urge everyone to be vaccinated. I consulted with healthcare professionals and chose to be vaccinated because I believe it is a vital measure for our safety and because it is the most important step we can take to protect the UNG community.

If you have reservations about the vaccine, I urge you to talk with your healthcare provider to make a well-informed decision. We will announce details very soon for an incentive plan to encourage more employees and students to be vaccinated.

UNG brings us together in a special way. We are fortunate to be in such an inspiring environment, amongst caring and committed colleagues, and at a growing university that develops leaders with the knowledge, integrity and desire to positively impact the lives of others.

As we begin this new academic year, I want you to know how much I appreciate your commitment to our mission and values and to helping North Georgia soar to new heights!

Thank you. I wish you a successful and productive year!