

THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF ERSKINE B. BOWLES
Sixteenth President of the University of North Carolina
April 12, 2006

As I've gotten a little older, balder, and maybe a little wiser, I've learned that sometimes in life, the real world is even better than your fondest dreams. Serving as the 16th president of *my* University—the University of North Carolina—is *by far* the single greatest honor I can imagine ever being given. As my Mama, who is sitting right down there in the front row, knows, I am about to burst with joy to stand before you in my hometown, surrounded by my family and my friends from across our state and nation as the leader of our University. I thank you for the enormous trust you have bestowed upon me and for the privilege you have given me to serve the people of North Carolina.

But today's ceremony really isn't about Erskine Bowles. Rather, it's a *celebration*—a celebration of our University's distinguished past and an *affirmation* of the critical role that each and every UNC campus must play in the future of North Carolina. Today's ceremony is a *tribute* to more than two centuries of incredibly generous support of our University by our legislature, state leaders, and citizens. It's also an acknowledgement that this University's reputation for excellence, our record of achievement, and our boundless potential—all belong to the faculty, the staff, our remarkable corps of chancellors, and those talented students that fill our classrooms. It is these people who are our University—*they* are the individuals who have made and kept this University great, and in them rest our hopes for an even brighter tomorrow.

Since this University's rebirth in 1972, it has had but three leaders: Bill Friday—my hero; Dick Spangler—my longtime friend and advisor; and Molly Broad—whose legacy of rebuilding is still taking physical shape across our 16

campuses. On behalf of all the people of our state, I thank these three great North Carolinians for coming home to be with us today. We thank you for your unwavering insistence on academic excellence, for your visionary leadership, and for the lasting difference you have made in the lives of our people. It is an *honor* to follow you as president of this University.

Today we can look back over the long sweep of history and know that we have kept faith with the founders of this great University. For more than two centuries, the people of North Carolina have believed to their very core in the enduring power of education. It is *that* faith and *their* support—embodied in progressive leaders and statesmen with names like Aycock, Alderman, Shepard, Graham, Sanford, Cone, Holshouser, and Hunt—that have sustained this University and this state through generation after generation.

Time and again, the teaching, research, and public service of our University and its leaders have helped North Carolina weather transition and change to improve the lives and livelihoods of our people. At pivotal points in our history, this University has provided the toolkit with which the people of North Carolina built their way out of poverty and mediocrity. By offering the raw material of innovation and the glue of common purpose, the University has shown how our aspirations could take concrete form.

Today we look ahead with renewed faith to ponder what education will mean to the *future* of North Carolina; for we as a state and we as a University are facing some enormous challenges in the days ahead. All of us have seen with our own eyes the dramatic change that has occurred in North Carolina's economy because of losses on our farms and in the textile, apparel, and furniture industries—industries that sustained us for generations. But as significant as these transformational changes have been to our economy, I'm afraid we haven't seen anything yet.

As Tom Friedman says in *The World is Flat*, technology has now “wired the whole world together” and leveled the global playing field in the process. As we here in North Carolina have painfully learned, our people are no longer competing for jobs and work with just the citizens of South Carolina, Tennessee, or Georgia. In today’s knowledge-based global economy, we’re competing head-to-head with China, India, and dozens of other countries that are making tremendous strategic investments in education and research. The cold hard fact is that if we don’t get more of our *own* people better educated, we’re in a losing fight—a fight that if we shape up we can still win, and win big.

This sobering conclusion is echoed in a recent report from the National Academies called “Rising Above the Gathering Storm.” The authors include both conservative businessmen and liberal philosophers, and unanimously they warn that the “scientific and technical building blocks of our economic leadership are eroding at a time when many other nations are gathering strength.” They conclude that the U.S. “must compete by optimizing its knowledge-based resources, particularly in science and technology, and by sustaining the most fertile environment for new and revitalized industries and the well-paying jobs they bring.”

I, for one, have seen up close that “gathering storm” they talked about. Following last year’s tsunami, I spent a considerable amount of time in Southeast Asia, and I confess it was a real wake-up call for me. As I traveled throughout India, Singapore, and Indonesia, I came to the sobering realization that an *economic* tsunami is fast bearing down on North Carolina and our entire nation.

Our natural inclination might be to batten down the hatches and hope to ride the storm out. But the truth of the matter is this: if we don’t grab hold of the future and get more people better educated, we are going to be crushed by this tidal wave of highly educated people from all parts of the world competing for the jobs

of tomorrow—jobs that our children and their children will so desperately need to preserve their futures.

Let me paint a quick picture of this economic tsunami for you.

- If you go into a first-grade classroom in China today, you are likely to find 40 kids sitting in front of computers taking math—in *English*. How many first-grade classrooms have you seen with 40 American kids sitting in front of computers—much less sitting in front of computers studying math—in *Chinese*?
- If that's not enough to make you sit up, think about the fact that within five years, 90 percent of the world's scientists and engineers will be living and working in Asia.
- At a time when the world is clamoring for science and engineering talent, about two-thirds of the students in U.S. high schools studying chemistry and physics are taught by teachers who are not certified in the field and didn't major in the subject. Think about this: in the past four years, our 15 schools of education at the University of North Carolina turned out a grand total of three physics teachers. *Three*. And we're going to compete with these guys in Asia? Come on—not that way.
- The sad truth is that for every 100 8th-graders in North Carolina, 58 will graduate from high school, 38 will go to college, 28 will come back for the second year, and only 18 will graduate from college. Well, you know what? That worked fine in my day, when supposedly the best and brightest came out of the education funnel with a degree, while the “muscle economy”

provided plenty of low-skill, but moderate-paying jobs for the rest of our population. But those low-skill jobs are gone—and they are not coming back.

Far too many North Carolinians still believe that we don't have to worry about the loss of these low-skill jobs because American smarts and ingenuity will create the next new thing. They say, "We always have, and we always will." Well, I've got news for them. If we don't wake up and get more Americans—more North Carolinians—better educated, that next new thing isn't going to be created here. It's very likely to be invented by one of those smart folks in Asia—and that's where the new jobs of the future will be.

The velocity of this change going on in the world today is faster than the dot.com revolution was. Today's knowledge-based global economy is changing so fast and so radically, that if America and North Carolina don't wake up and get more people better educated, we will become a second-rate power before we know it. And I'm not talking about 50 years from now. I'm talking about in my lifetime. In *your* lifetime.

So what are we going to do about this? What can we do to make sure our citizens can compete in this global economy? Here's what I think we need to do. We do what we've always done in North Carolina. We take off these robes, and we roll up our sleeves, and we go to work and we succeed. We grow and we prosper, and we build a better tomorrow for our kids and their kids. After all, North Carolina is the state where the weak grow strong and the strong grow great.

Here's what your *University* is going to do. You can bet your bottom dollar we're not going to sit around and wait. We are going to do what your University has always done in difficult times: *We are going to lead.*

For starters, your University is going to operate more efficiently and effectively in order to redirect every single dollar we possibly can to the classroom and to the 200,000 students we're responsible for educating.

With our own house in order, we're going to focus our efforts in areas that can give North Carolina the best chance to compete and win in this new world of work. In my very first meeting with the UNC Board of Governors, I described the conceptual *prism* through which I'm going to view everything we do—all with the goal of sharpening our vision, brightening our future, and bringing greater clarity to the challenges—and the opportunities—before us.

The first facet of this prism is improving K-12. Nothing is more important. Our state Constitution requires us to give all our children a sound, basic education. Doesn't it, Judge Manning? I thank you, Judge Manning, for your leadership and your enormous public service, and I promise you, Judge—and I promise the people of North Carolina—that your University will do everything we possibly can to support and strengthen our public schools so they can deliver that sound, basic education that our Constitution demands.

Such efforts have long been a hallmark of this University. As he took the oath of office back in 1915, UNC President Edward Kidder Graham spoke of the “spiritual union” between North Carolina's elementary and secondary schools and its institutions of higher education, and he declared that “it is the function of the University...not merely to train teachers in the facts and methods of education, but to fire them [*—fire them—*] with the conviction that they are the productive creators of a new civilization.” One of North Carolina's great teachers is here with us today. Her name is Ms. Jane Crisp. Some 48 years ago, Ms. Crisp believed in a seventh-grade student named Erskine Bowles, and she lit a *fire* under me that is still raging and burning white hot.

The legendary Frank Porter Graham reminded us in his 1931 inaugural address that “the University is resourced in the public schools and the public schools are resourced in the University. They go up or down together.” While our 15 schools of education continue to produce the majority of the state’s teachers, principals, and superintendents, we don’t produce nearly enough of them.

As a result, our state has a crying need for *more* teachers, *better* teachers, science and math teachers, stronger curriculum, and better trained principals. Over the course of the past year, UNC campuses produced more than 3,900 potential teachers, yet today North Carolina must hire more than 11,000 teachers each year. That is an enormous gap—a gap we must and will close.

The University cannot solve this problem alone, but we’re certainly going to do our part. We are going to *lead*, and we *will* recruit more teachers, train our teachers better, and we will mentor those teachers. We are going to produce more Jane Crisps to light a *fire* under the students of tomorrow. Thank you, Ms. Crisp. Thank you for all you did for me.

A second facet of my prism zeroes in on our commitment to ensure that we have a seamless and collaborative relationship with our community colleges. Our community colleges are an enormous asset for North Carolina, and they are every bit as important, if not more so, than the University is to the future economic well-being of North Carolina. I’m so pleased that President Martin Lancaster is here with us today. He and I are already working together to strengthen and build on our two systems’ relationship in order to make it easier for students in all regions of our state to get the academic courses and programs they need to compete in today’s economy. President Lancaster and I believe that working together just makes good common sense for our students and the taxpayers of North Carolina.

The third side of my prism focuses on access and affordability—how we get more of those 8th-graders who *do* stay in school and graduate from high school the

financial resources and support they need to go on to college. Our University must do everything possible to ensure that every qualified person who wants to attend one of our 16 campuses can afford to do so. That means working with the legislature to keep tuition low—not just because we have a Constitutional mandate to do so, but because it’s our moral responsibility to do so. It means increasing scholarships and the pool of need-based financial aid. It means utilizing our facilities to the maximum and investing more resources in distance education and continuing education. It means convincing the legislature that supporting summer school makes good economic sense. And it means we must raise the educational *aspirations* of kids whose parents didn’t graduate from high school, much less go to college.

Fourth, while we’re doing a good job today of getting more students into our University, another side of the prism I am going to focus on is *keeping them there after they enroll*. Our retention rates in our universities—all of them—are wholly unacceptable, and our campuses have got to do better. That means better mentoring of these students once they arrive.

In order to position our state to compete and win in the global economy, we must help our students gain the knowledge and 21st-century skills they will need to get those jobs of tomorrow. Those entering today’s workforce must have critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and communication skills. And we must produce graduates who not only know how to make a living, but are also productive citizens and contributing members of their communities.

To that end, a fifth part of the prism must be sustaining our historic commitment to public service and research—quality research. Our University research extends our knowledge, advances the welfare of mankind, and ensures the future economic well-being of the people of North Carolina. Each year, our campuses attract more than \$1 billion in competitive research grants and

contracts—mostly from the federal government. We must continue to build on that enviable record.

In partnership with business, government, and the other sectors of education, this University must continue to seek out ways to help every region of North Carolina foster and stimulate economic development. In this regard, we must better align our curriculum with the changing needs of business and emerging industries. We must find better ways to share and apply the technologies developed on our campuses, and we must help supply the expertise communities need to adapt to this global economy.

The last facet of my prism is perhaps the most important, for everything else will be for naught if we don't have great faculty. Our faculty are our greatest asset. They are our reputation. They hold the key to our future in their *minds*. We *have* to be able to attract and keep great faculty. And to do that, we must pay them and provide them with the facilities, equipment, and freedom of inquiry they need to carry out their three-part mission of teaching, research, and public service.

Now is not the time to be complacent. To win in this new knowledge-based, global economy, we must move forward quickly to train and educate our young people and non-traditional students for tomorrow's new opportunities. The skills and knowledge required to get a job, keep a job, and certainly to advance to more senior jobs, now require constant retraining and re-education. Clearly, old patterns, structures, and approaches that have worked for centuries must be tested, revised, discarded, or enhanced so that they can serve our needs in this rapidly changing global world in which we live.

Even as the clouds of this global economic tsunami gather on the horizon, we must never forget that this great University has helped North Carolinians weather adversity before. Exactly 100 years ago, during the 1906 commencement

exercises at the University of North Carolina, alumnus Shepard Bryan offered an admonition that still rings eerily true today. I quote:

“Anchored some 14 miles at sea off Hatteras is a lightship. In storm and sunshine, in fair weather and foul, by day and by night, ever faithful, this ship warns the mariner of the dangerous sands of Hatteras, guides him between the hungry shoals on the land side and the gulf stream seaward, and tells him of anxious hearts safe in the security of shore and home, who watch and pray for his safety. The University is a lightship to the State. Let it warn the people of North Carolina of the folly of ignorance. Let it guide them into the channel of wisdom and knowledge. Let it shine like Hatteras light, to show the youth of the State that there are willing hands and loving hearts waiting to help them upward and onward in the race of life.” [END QUOTE]

My friends and colleagues; my fellow citizens of my beloved North Carolina: This is the solemn pledge that I make to you, the people of North Carolina. With your continued support and with the help of a dedicated, talented faculty and staff, the University of North Carolina will shine like Hatteras light in the midst of a raging tsunami.

The North Carolina of tomorrow will *be* better educated. It *will* be smarter. It *will* be more nimble. And as a result, our people *will* be able to compete—and compete successfully—with the world’s best and brightest, wherever they may be.

Thank you.