

# Doing more with less research paper examples

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## Doing More with Less: UNC and the Challenge of Academic Leadership in 21st Century America

### **Abstract**

The University of North Carolina system is renowned for upholding a long tradition of academic excellence and for maintaining a philosophy rooted in innovation. The nation's economic downturn has done considerable damage to higher education and made it difficult for many Americans to secure a college degree. Consequently, the UNC system institutions are challenged to continue meeting the demands of a dynamic, increasingly technology-driven society despite drastic reductions in funding. Technology may offer one particularly cost-effective and reliable growth area for academics and provide a practical solution to logistical challenges. Ultimately, the UNC system must find ways to continue the evolution of higher education amid a rapidly changing society, even as that society struggles with the role of education in a resource-poor landscape.

### **UNC and the Challenge of Academic Leadership in 21st Century America**

The pace of change in America's 21st-century educational landscape demands of all states that policies impacting the mission of higher education address issues that reflect a rapidly changing world. North Carolina's system of higher education, which is justly famous for being among the world's most innovative, must meet the future with inventive policies designed to: meet the needs of minorities; step up educational program offerings via distance learning and other technological delivery systems; form a business model to address revenue opportunities presented by a lucrative sports marketing

licensing franchise; serve the needs of new and emerging technologies and businesses; and confront the persistent and rising need for financial aid among students who seek an education in the midst of dire economic conditions.

Circumstances have combined to form a perfect storm of fiscal misfortune in which tuition continues to spiral up and funding diminishes. In April 2011, University of North Carolina system president Tom Ross told the governors of the state's university system that present-day economic reality may force the UNC system to contract in a number of key areas and cause a sea change in the philosophy of the system's 16 member institutions. An anticipated 15 percent cut in state funding means that thousands of course offerings would be eliminated from university curricula across the state, and that more than 3, 000 jobs would be lost (Ferreri & Price, 2011). State and university officials are quick to remind the public that the UNC system still comprises one of the nation's best educational bargains, but the numbers say that may be coming to an end. A Raleigh News & Observer article reported that 20 years ago the university system received more than 80 percent of its funding from state government. In 2010, that figure was down to less than 64 percent, while tuition has skyrocketed 175 percent over the past 10 years (2011). University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Chancellor Holden Thorp said the entire system faces "qualitative changes to education" (2011). The effect of such change on standing policy, and on future plans, is expected to be profound, perhaps even transformational.

## **Adapting to changes in demography**

During the 1990s, North Carolina led the nation in immigration-driven population change (Johnson & Kenan, 2007). Since 1992, the state's immigrant population has increased by more than 300 percent. The largest sections of this minority growth include Hispanics, Asians and non-Hispanic whites, with the Hispanic component of this growth being by far the largest (2007). It is typical that educational opportunities have lagged behind the rate of immigrant growth in North Carolina, as in other states. In particular, minorities suffer from inadequate or isolated secondary schools in the state, which restricts the development of academic skills and the likelihood that minority students will have a chance to attend college. The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill has spearheaded a policy program aimed at shoring up disadvantaged, low-performing preparatory schools.

Recognizing that the consequences of inaction could be severe in the current climate, the Kenan-Flagler Business School and UNC Principals Executive Program have combined forces to develop a program designed to help administrators of poor performing schools develop important academic leadership skills (Johnson and Kenan, 2007). The program provides the administrators with a plan aimed at helping them develop leadership and managerial skills, though the developers of this policy are quick to point out that their motivation is only marginally social or moral (2007). Preparing teachers and administrators means their students will be better-prepared for a university education, the goal being " to ensure that students attending these schools are prepared either to pursue post-secondary education or to cope with the rapid and unpredictable changes that will characterize the

world of work and business” in the coming years (2007). The subtext of this policy is to ensure that the university system is helping to prepare a section of the population that will constitute an increasingly large percentage of the student body in years to come.

In his book *What’s Happening to Public Higher Education?: The Shifting Financial Burden*, Ronald Ehrenberg notes that, despite the stress on the economy, enrollment levels at UNC universities are anticipated to increase as the number of high school graduates in the state increases (Ehrenberg, 2006). The recent demographic trend among North Carolina’s high school graduation rates reflect the state’s burgeoning Hispanic population, so the university system has a major stake in the ongoing success of the secondary school administrators’ program (2006). Ehrenberg points out that North Carolina is above the national average for college participation: if it is to remain that way, a policy program that helps prepare minorities for college coursework will be essential.

## **Growing with technology**

A growing minority population is forcing the UNC system to solve issues of demography, but technology is enhancing the ability of the UNC institutions to deliver higher education to people who are either geographically separated from the systems’ physical facilities or are simply too busy to attend scheduled classes. In 2003, the North Carolina General Assembly passed HB 1264, which authorized a study to determine how the state’s public universities and community colleges could best serve the state’s future economic interests (HB 1264, 2003). Entitled “ Staying a Step Ahead: Education Transforming North Carolina’s Economy,” the study took a

panoramic view of substantive and logistical measures the state's colleges and universities could adopt to meet the needs of a shifting demography and make optimal use of emerging technologies. The study, which took two years to complete, identified core areas in which the state could enhance how it delivers education to the populace.

Distance learning was a major point of emphasis in the study. In the early years of the 21st century, the number of students accessing courses at the university system's 16 campuses through distance learning technologies grew significantly in a relatively short period of time. From 1999 to 2003, this number jumped by 189 percent, and was expected to continue to increase at an accelerated rate (Walden, 2008). In addition to making it possible for more people to attend college, distance learning offers the UNC institutions a number of advantages, such as avoiding on-campus crowding and enhancing one-on-one instructor-student interaction. Students can still take part in classroom discussions, participate in simulated laboratory experiments and work in groups with other students through distance learning (2008).

Recognizing the benefits to students and the universities, the 2005 study determined that more emphasis should be placed on distance learning throughout the UNC system. "Distance learning options should be a critical consideration in all plans to expand programs, to develop collaborative arrangements, or to provide new services" (Pappas, 2005). Considering the current economic crisis, and in anticipation of funding cuts and consequent staff/faculty reductions, the system's governors made a policy decision to expand the distance learning program. As of 2010, the UNC system schools offered 135 full degree programs online, with more than 70,000 students

enrolled in online-based degree programs (Cochrane, 2010). University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill board member Frank Daniels said distance learning options will help offset the anticipated \$3.5 billion budgetary shortfall: “ In the long run it will be less expensive because you’ll cut down on the buildings you’d have to build” (2010).

## **HEAR and the UNC system**

Passage of the Higher Education Act Reauthorization (HEAR) in July 2008 meant the reestablishment of Pell grant, loan and student readiness programs. One program of which UNC system leaders have been justifiably proud is the Teaching Fellows Program, which offered full tuition to qualified high school students who committed to teaching for four years in North Carolina schools after graduation. Since 1986, this far-sighted policy program has benefited the UNC university system as well as the state’s public school systems, and served as inspiration for Congressman David Price (D-NC), who used it as a model for the Teacher Quality Partnership grant program, which is included within the HEAR legislation (AASCU, 2010). But North Carolina’s successful incentive program appears to be headed the way of many such insightful initiatives, due to a non-conducive legislative and economic environment.

In July 2011, UNC system officials received word that the annual \$13.5 million required to fund the Teaching Fellows Program had been removed from the state budget, bringing an end to one of the system’s most innovative creations. Former governor Jim Hunt, who presided over passage and implementation of many far-reaching educational initiatives, said there

should be concern in the political and academic spheres that North Carolina stands to lose its edge in the field of higher education, and indicated he fears an erosion of the strong partnership that has long existed between the state's universities and its primary and secondary school systems. " These are all programs that have a great impact on North Carolina moving up among the states in learning and getting scores among the top tier in the nation," Hunt said (Christensen, 2011). While UNC's 16 member institutions can expect the reauthorization of federal resources thanks to HEAR, budgetary constraints at the state level threaten to undermine many of the advances North Carolina has made in the field of education.

Cost containment provisions within HEAR may help offset some of the setbacks the UNC system has sustained. As of July 2010, textbook publishers are required to provide faculty members with information on price, copyright dates and whether textbooks are available in other formats; they must also provide textbooks in bundled and unbundled delivery formats ([www.northcarolina.edu](http://www.northcarolina.edu), 2011). The system's universities are also working in concert to share pricing information and enhance purchasing power in an effort pass savings on to students. Volume purchasing and cost-effective e-procurement measures are also being undertaken among the UNC institutions in order to maximize their collective purchasing power. With tuition decidedly on the upswing, schools will increasingly be forced to seek out inventive ways to help students afford course texts and related materials.



## **Non-traditional revenue**

Though not in the business of driving profit margins, universities faced by tightening budgets are looking for creative ways, both overt and inadvertent, to maximize available resources and, where possible, generate revenue. One of the most lucrative sources of money is a by-product of wildly popular college sports, such as football and basketball. The University of North Carolina is fortunate to have one of the nation's marquee basketball programs, a team with followers in all parts of the U. S. These fans purchase millions of dollars' worth of Tar Heel logo wear, which presents the university with a considerable windfall. The fact that the University of North Carolina is annually among the national leaders in profits earned from the licensing of its logo is seen by some as a conflict, in which marketing contrasts with the true mission of the university and the system to which it belongs (Dill, 2005).

Between 2001 and 2005, the University of North Carolina was the nation's top seller of sports logo merchandise, the university receiving 10 percent of the cost of each logo item sold (Alessandri, 2009). Sportswear colossus Nike has a lengthy relationship with UNC, the two having signed a \$7 million dollar shoes and clothing deal in 1997. When UNC students protested the university's involvement with Nike due to the company's well-publicized labor violations in Asia, university officials were pushed to take a policy stand not only concerning its partnership with Nike, but on its philosophy vis a vis the relationship between commercialism and academia (Shaw, 1999). In contrast with anti-Nike sentiment at schools like Stanford and the University

of California-Berkeley, UNC came to the conclusion that the company was “doing the best it could” in Asia, and elected to retain its ties to Nike (Ibid).

## **Conclusion**

Considering the pressure rising costs are placing on higher education to remain relevant in 21st century America, it is vitally important that each of the UNC system member institutions reassess how it is positioned to help the communities it serves adapt to the requirements of a dynamic and changing society. To that end, UNC system administrators should institute a system-wide review process, based on set criteria, to determine how well each school is addressing the particular skills needed to attain success in emerging businesses and technologies (Pappas, 2005). This process might begin with the establishment of the business sectors that should be targeted, identifying the specific skills required by each and fashioning curricula that fits those academic needs (2005). The university system might consider commissioning a study aimed at formulating a developmental architecture for such an initiative.

Taking this recommendation a step further, it should be recommended that the system’s administrators implement an incentive for academic program review and revision (Pappas, 2005). The system’s board of governors or the president’s office could administer a fund providing support for schools that achieve meaningful change in academic programs that aid students in preparing for careers in emerging industries and businesses. Higher education should, by definition, provide forward-thinking, even groundbreaking academic initiatives to meet the needs of 21st-century America and the world. Adopting this mindset could do much to help restore

the UNC system to its accustomed leadership position among the nation's pacesetters in higher education.

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