OPEN LETTER TO THE FACULTY

Welcome back and happy New Year! I hope all of you enjoyed a restful and joyous time with family and friends and that you have returned to UNC Pembroke feeling renewed. Sarah and I traveled to Maine for our son’s wedding during the big blizzard that hit New England. Our travel coming and going was an adventure, but we got there and he got married. So, all worked out in spite of the weather.

This semester will be like other spring semesters in many ways—frenetic, for one thing. But this semester will also be very different. This memo is intended to set that context for you.

At the end of last semester, Provost Kitts and I met with the schools and college to hear faculty questions, concerns, ideas, and accomplishments. They were great meetings and opened important lines of communication—so much so that we are going to continue those meetings each semester. These meetings also revealed an unexpected condition: Many faculty members are unaware and sometimes misinformed about important matters. As I reflected on this revelation over the break, I landed on two primary explanations: (1) the senior administration isn’t communicating to the degree it could, and (2) information that does come from the top of the organization doesn’t necessarily make it down through the administrative structure to the faculty. I suspect both of these are true.

I confess that I purposely do not share widely many of the threats and challenges that the cabinet wrestles with weekly—simply to protect the campus from worry. This practice has pros and cons. Certainly, withholding troubling information shields others from distress, but sharing too little results in people misunderstanding a situation and not knowing that solutions are perhaps underway. By the same token, sharing everything may cause people to worry unnecessarily. My leadership team and I are going to try to improve on both fronts. We will insist that information travels through administrative channels to you, and I will keep you better informed about the larger issues facing the institution. In fact, that is the purpose of this memo.

This spring semester is a critical time for higher education, in general, and UNC Pembroke in particular. Although the legislative session doesn't begin until May, political positions on many important issues will be formulated over the next four months. General Administration, under President Ross' leadership, and all the system's chancellors will be making the case for the UNC system and their respective campuses. Why? Some in the legislature continue to believe that the UNC system is inefficient and overfunded. As a case in point, a recent report by the State's Program Evaluation Division (PED) urges the general assembly tomandate the UNC system to exert more central control over campuses to create efficiencies and save money. I recommend you read the report so that you have a better understanding of the legislative focus this next session. Based on my reading, it appears the focus is certainly not on re-establishing our national stature in higher education: [http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/PED/Reports/documents/UNC/UNC_Report.pdf].

Among the many recommendations made, PED targets campus space use and metrics for operational performance, and it recommends linking chancellor performance to academic and operational efficiency goals. These aren't necessarily harmful recommendations, but they do give us a glimpse of the mindset of our legislators in the coming months.

Of greater concern to me is the belief that the system is over-funded. Unless we can dispel this belief, there is a real danger of additional cuts to the UNC System – and at a time when UNC Pembroke's financial footing is showing promise: Enrollment for spring appears to be up, retention is improving, and the fall numbers are very promising. As unbelievable as it may sound to you, some legislators aren't overly concerned about UNC faculty pay. Unfortunately, they look at faculty salary without regard to national standards and conclude that UNC faculty make a good living and do not need raises. On the other hand, we are hearing that the legislature is concerned about pay for K-12 teachers and want to make it a priority during this session. We must make certain that pay raises for K-12 and UNC faculty are equally valued and addressed.

With these trends in mind, Provost Kitts and I will be spending considerable time and energy this spring advocating for UNC Pembroke. I will be off-campus more than usual, meeting with decision makers and legislators. Further, the Cabinet will host our legislative delegation on campus in March, as is our custom, to advocate for UNC Pembroke’s needs. In addition, the provost and I will be writing op-ed pieces at strategic times during the spring semester to advocate for UNCP and public higher education. Changing the opinion
of some legislators is going to be a tough sell, but there is some good news: We have made significant progres with the Board of Governors—most of whom are now our advocates. They are very influential with the legislature. Locally, our Trustees are solidly in our camp. At the February BOT meeting we will present a faculty panel entitled “A Day in the Life of Faculty” to help our trustees further understand the role of faculty and their challenges.

As explained below, we have a couple of internal issues that we must address at the same time that we attempt to convince a fairly significant segment of the legislature to value what we do. Therefore, it is important for us to work through these issues as a unified campus. That doesn’t mean that we can’t have tough conversations or disagree. We should. However, at the end of the day we must find solutions that are in the best interest of the institution. When we do, we will be perceived as a collective of dedicated professionals who work effectively for the benefit of North Carolina’s citizens.

Campus Citizenship. Discussions surrounding this topic have given rise to a mixed bag of results. On one hand, we have had some excellent and candid conversations about faculty roles on campus and the ways in which technology is challenging our traditional notions of engagement. But these same discussions have given rise to an unnecessary amount of anxiety and have fueled ill-founded rumors about changes in tenure requirements or unreasonable expectations for faculty participation in campus events. Therefore, the provost and I have decided to reorient this conversation away from the emphasis on citizenship and toward the more important themes of student access and student success. We will work with faculty collegially to ensure that our students have unobstructed pathways to graduation through enhanced advisement, more engagement opportunities, greater course availability, and expanded interactions with faculty. The provost and his team will be working with faculty leaders to determine the most constructive steps to move us in this direction.

The FY 2014-15 University Budget. Former hockey great Wayne Gretsky once explained his ability to score goals by stating, “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.” As we anticipate next year’s budget, I believe we need to embrace Gretsky’s philosophy and skate to where we believe our budget will be in July and not wait six months to know for sure. That’s a tall order because we won’t know what the legislature will do before June, and there are a number of additional unknowns. Regardless, we need to develop an action plan that factors in the budget reduction of $464,000 that was called for in the biennium budget passed last session as well as the adjustment for enrollment, which we are currently negotiating with General Administration. And we should also plan for additional legislative reductions that are unanticipated, but that nonetheless might occur. On a positive note, GA is lobbying legislators to eliminate that $464,000 in cuts for next year and is seeking more enrollment money. Further, if our positive enrollment numbers continue, we will have more tuition revenue in the fall. Extending the hockey metaphor, the puck will be all over the ice, so we must look ahead and plan carefully to intercept it at every opportunity. To strategize, I will begin a budget review during January. This will involve the cabinet, deans, department chairs, University Oversight Committee, and several open forums that will allow all faculty to provide input. My cabinet will update you as we develop our plans, but rest assured that the budget reduction plan will be informed by our strategic plan and four core principles:

- Protect Academic Quality
- Foster Student Success
- Maintain Administrative Integrity (e.g., continue accurate and efficient financial and personnel systems)
- Minimize full-time job loss

We will develop several scenarios that can be put into place once we know what we face. I suspect you are as tired as I am with budget reduction processes, but it is better to prepare now than to be reactive. Also, by beginning this review process now, we can ensure the broad input from across campus that will allow us to identify the best options for dealing with the possibility of future budget cuts.

With all of that said, I want to end on a very encouraging note. UNC Pembroke has created a very positive academic impression at General Administration and with the Board of Governors and state elected officials. This started last April when we hosted the Board of Governors. I still have BOG members recall their visit and how impressed they were with the students and faculty they met. At each Board of Governors meeting, BOG members learn about our accomplishments through President Ross’ report and are keenly aware of the quality initiatives surrounding our commitments to Student Success and to making UNCP an Institution of Choice. Our “stock value” increased even more following UNC-TV’s profile of our university, which aired in the fall, and Ben Bahr’s Public Service award and subsequent UNC-TV profile. Additional publicity surrounding the Entrepreneurship Incubator has favorably impressed the BOG as well as Governor McCrory and key lawmakers. We are riding a crest right now in spite of the tough times. I am confident that we will continue to show external groups that we are an institution worthy of investment and the public’s trust.