

Stick to the Mission

ACTA president Anne Neal urges trustees to focus on undergraduate learning.

By Anne Neal

(Editor's note: This article is based on a talk by Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, to members of the UNC Board of Governors at a Pope Center event August 12. ACTA is an independent, nonprofit organization that advocates for quality higher education at an affordable price.)

It's no coincidence that many of our Founding Fathers were also Founding Trustees—Dickinson, Jefferson, and Madison, to name just a few. They understood that the health of our democratic republic depends upon an educated citizenry, and, by extension, on healthy educational institutions.

But for many colleges and universities, these are times of crisis.

- Endowments have shrunk and fundraising is significantly more difficult.
- Reductions in state funding for higher education have been massive.
- A *Chronicle of Higher Education* [survey](#) of chief financial officers reveals that 62 percent believe the worst is yet to come.

And consider how difficult economic times are for your students and families. Over the past 25 years, college tuition and fees [have risen](#) 440 percent, four times faster than inflation.

Two thirds of today's college graduates took out loans to complete school, accumulating an [average debt](#) of more than \$23,000. And only about 57 percent of first-time full-time students [graduate](#) in six years.

Employers meanwhile are [complaining loudly](#) about what passes for college education in a job market that has left college grads living at home—often without a job.

If that weren't bad enough, a majority of individuals polled recently by Public Agenda said they think [colleges could spend less](#) without decreasing educational quality and more than 80 percent agreed that students are having to borrow too much.

What is a beleaguered trustee to do?

Take heart. The new mayor of Chicago has a good motto that is particularly a propos for trustees: *Never let a crisis go to waste!*

Now, more than ever, state institutions need firm and courageous guidance from you as members of the Board of Governors.

Trustees are fiduciaries. Students, parents, stakeholders, and the taxpayers depend upon your vigilance and firmness. You shouldn't be pressured by the invocation of board discipline or board unity into voting against your principles or your conscience. There is no reason you have to reach consensus; there is nothing wrong with a divided vote.

As the system board, you alone can offer the big picture focused on statewide needs. And you cannot do everything, so stay focused on what really matters.

What you should focus on? Student learning.

All too often student learning is *not* the focus. Take a look at the recent books by quintessential insiders: former Harvard president Derek Bok, former Harvard dean Harry Lewis, and former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman. Their titles tell it all: *Our Underachieving Colleges*, *Excellence without a Soul*, *Education's End*.

Their message? Colleges and universities have lost touch with their educational mission.

Research by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni confirms that colleges and universities have, by and large, abandoned their obligation to point students to the [key subjects](#) that will ensure success after graduation.

- For example, fewer than 5 percent of colleges surveyed around the country require students to study economics before they graduate—certainly an area of knowledge, given these parlous times, that would seem essential to our well-being.
- Fewer than 20 percent expect their graduates to have taken a broad survey of American history or government.
- Over 50 percent of the private and 30 percent of the public colleges and universities we have surveyed have no college-level math requirement.

Students at Appalachian State can graduate without ever taking a course in composition, literature, American government or history, economics, or college-level math. Students at NC-Chapel Hill can graduate without ever having to study American history, economics, college-level math, or literature.

Nationally, a grim picture comes from Professor Richard Arum of New York University. He and his co-author Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia decided they would take a look at student learning. In a survey of more than 3,000 students at institutions across the country, they found that:

- 45 percent had little or no cognitive gain in their first two years.
- 36 percent had little or no cognitive gain in four years.

In another words, these students learned virtually nothing. This is troubling indeed.

Is the UNC system part of the problem? As governors, you can find out—and you should. You should know what students are learning—or whether they are learning. Are they getting the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life? What are they doing after graduation? Are they finding meaningful employment? Are they able to pay off their loans?

You should know, too, what happens to the many UNC students who *don't* graduate. At Greensboro, only 52 percent graduates in six years. At UNC Charlotte, it's 54 percent. At East Carolina: 57 percent. At Asheville: 59 percent. And at UNC Pembroke: only 34 percent. Why all the attrition? And where are these people now?

Undergraduate education is the University of North Carolina's core mission. And as trustees, it's your responsibility to make sure that every campus fulfills that mission. You can begin by studying what's happening on each campus—and system-wide. If you don't like what you find you should do something about it.

You are well positioned to act, thanks to UNC's governance structure. As a centralized board, you have the authority, and the responsibility, to insist that all students who graduate from the University of North Carolina system have the knowledge and skills they need to make their way in this tight economy and to participate meaningfully in our democracy.

I encourage you to use your authority to prioritize an education agenda for the UNC system around four key areas:

- **Curriculum.** Commission a study, working with the president, to review the core curriculum at each UNC campus. What does each UNC school say every student should know? Based on what you learn, work with campus leaders to establish a system-wide core curriculum that, at the very least, includes a U.S. history requirement and an economics requirement. The University of Texas has a system-wide core, as does the State University of New York.
- **Assessment.** Implement a standardized system-wide assessment of core knowledge and skills. Make sure UNC tracks whether students are learning what they need to know. Offer awards to campuses that exceed expected gains.
- **Costs.** Make it a priority for annual tuition increases not to exceed the consumer price index. Reward campuses that don't increase tuition at all—or that lower it. *Be willing to close or consolidate programs, when appropriate.* Beware of more building projects, even when students, rather than taxpayers, pay for them.

- **Retention.** Provide incentives in the form of extra funding for schools that raise their 4-year graduation rate without lowering requirements or sacrificing learning outcomes.

The UNC system is under stress. Your annual budget is hundreds of millions of dollars less than it was just a few years ago. This is putting enormous pressure on trustees, the president, chancellors, administrators, faculty, and students. As you well know, UNC's reputation has also suffered recently thanks to the NCAA investigation of the flagship's beloved football team. Such episodes are very costly. Even the damage control is costly. Sideshows of this sort just make your jobs harder—especially in times like these.

So it's official: your job verges on the impossible!

But, these difficult times offer you an opportunity to do what's right—and to do what Tar Heels do best: to stick together when things are tough, and to make it work no matter what. So congratulations, good luck, and please call on [ACTA](#) at any time.