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UNT President

November 5, 2025

Coby, thank you for that kind introduction. I do deeply appreciate and value the partnership with you and your faculty colleagues. It's so great to see so many of our faculty here today. Thank you for your hard work and commitment on behalf of our students and our great university.

I want to acknowledge our elected officials and welcome Denton Mayor Gerard Hudspeth, Sanger Mayor Thomas Muir, and Denton City Council member Chris Watts. Thank you for being here and working so closely with me, so closely with us for the greater good of our communities.

Welcome to retired Congressman Michael Burgess, retired state representative Myra Crownover, and we also have retired Judges Margaret Kelliher and Kirk Wilson. Thank you for being here. It is an honor to have you join us today. Thank you.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my cabinet members, our deans, and our UNT System leadership. To our Board of Regents—I believe we have three regents here today, Laura Wright, Cathy Bryce, and Lindy Rydman—and I want to say our chancellor, my friend Michael Williams. Thank you for your leadership and thank you for your guidance for our great university system. I want to say every day, I am grateful that you entrusted me to lead our University of North Texas.

I'd also like to acknowledge our students in attendance today, especially our incredibly talented students who joined our faculty from our College of Music, the leadership of our Student Government Association, Graduate Student Council, also we have members of my President's Student Advisory Committee. Thank you for your advice, and your partnership, and please let me know if any of you need a note to be excused from class.

A special welcome to our donors and guests visiting or watching online. You are joining us on a very important day. This is a day for us to reflect on how far we've come, to celebrate our progress, and to share a new strategic plan for the future of the University of North Texas, for the next five years and for a new era in our history.

I joined UNT as president in August of last year. Now, I'm well into in my sophomore year, and I am so proud of our work together over these last fifteen months. We faced significant trials, we worked together, and made tremendous progress. Of course, there is still so much to do. But, without a doubt, the state of the University of North Texas is stronger than ever before, and I am excited about our work ahead.

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In 1890, our founding president, Joshua C. Chilton, said, "Our aim will constantly be to adjust the work of the college to the demands of the times." And for American universities and for UNT, the times are indeed incredibly demanding. The need for adaptability, for innovation, and for bold action has never been greater. We face financial challenges from policy changes that have affected international student enrollment and research funding. We face an unprecedented pace of change that's wrought by the AI and digital revolution that is redefining what it means to be workforce-ready. And we also face a crisis in public confidence in higher education and questions about whether our values and our work reflect and advance our mission, our public responsibilities, and societal expectations.

Our vision for the future of UNT and the work we have already started will enable us to address these challenges, emerge even stronger, and lead the way forward as a new kind of American public research university.

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The plan we're releasing today is not just reflective of my own vision for a vibrant and vital UNT future. It is the product of thousands of hours of discussions and input from more than 1,200 students, staff, faculty, alumni, employers, and others. Many of you here today contributed your time and your insights, and I want to say thank you.

Our plan is grounded in our shared values and the unique responsibilities that come from our mission and our role for our region, our state, and our nation. We know we can't just profess our values. These values—Courageous Integrity, Be Curious, We Care, Better Together, and Show Your Fire—are only meaningful if we infuse them into our strategy, our

operations, our classrooms, and our actions, in a spirit of mutual respect and accountability.

Our plan reflects a bold commitment to expand opportunity at unprecedented scale. Last year, we announced we would join the vanguard of American public research universities who commit to advance excellence and innovation in an inclusive rather than an exclusive way. Other universities tout how many qualified students they don't serve and they turn away. At UNT, we will educate every qualified student who commits to learn with us, and we are committed to the success of every student we enroll.

Our plan is built on a bolder conception of student success than most universities have been willing to embrace. Universities typically measure student success in diplomas and graduation rates, which glosses over questions about the quality of the student experience and what happens after graduation. Here, the diploma isn't the destination — the UNT experience and student success must translate into meaningful opportunities.

From our first engagement with our students, through their time enrolled with us and into their careers, we take responsibility for equipping our students with knowledge, skills, and transformative experiences that allow them to take their talents and their skills to new heights in their careers and throughout their lives.

Our plan also reflects a bold commitment to our region, our state, and our nation. The University of North Texas is a leading American public research university. We're already counted among the nation's top universities for the scope and intensity of our research, for the caliber of our creative work, and for driving social mobility. We are also the largest university in the most dynamic region in the fastest growing state in the largest national economy in the world.

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Our strategic plan for the next five years and beyond is organized around three priorities:

- To develop human potential;
- To discover new insights; and
- To drive new opportunities.

And within and across each of these priorities, our mission is to create enduring value for the public good. Enduring value by developing the potential of our students and our UNT community members, by discovering new knowledge and insights at the frontiers of human understanding, and by driving opportunity at scale through the power of human creativity, innovation, and new models of higher education. To create value that endures for families, communities, generations.

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To develop human potential, especially in our students, is our most fundamental responsibility. Over the last year, we have been working together to establish an incredibly strong foundation for our students' academic and professional success.

At the university level, the foundation we're building includes next-generation analytics powered by AI, to help us connect individual students with the support they need. We will reform—and we'll invest in—student advising to better leverage our data, develop our advisors, and break down the traditional silos between academic and career advising. To advance our commitment to student success that persists beyond graduation, we'll develop students' professional skills and networks through courses, coaching, real-world projects for companies, and internships.

For every one of our UNT undergraduate and graduates, we're analyzing data about costs and salaries so we can ask how quickly our students break even on their investments. We're bringing those analyses into dialogue with other data about the costs of delivering these programs, and data about the demand for programs across our region and beyond. All of that helps us know which programs we might need to expand, where we might need to improve, or to phase out programs.

Across all these efforts, I am deeply grateful to Provost Mike McPherson, Chief Financial Officer Clayton Gibson, Vice Provost Lisa McIntyre, and Vice Presidents James Garrison, Shannon Goodman, Michelle Singh, and Elizabeth With. We're also partnering with leading national experts and building on their work. We're one of only eight institutions who have come together to accelerate innovation in integrating practical experiences into higher education, as part of the National Work-Integrated Learning Accelerator led by Arizona State University. We're also working with the Postsecondary Commission to help develop and test an entirely new approach to accrediting universities based on our outcomes.

We're excited about this groundbreaking work. Still, if we're truly committed to creating enduring value for our students, we have to ask ourselves even deeper questions about how students learn and how teaching should change in a rapidly changing world.

Last year, to help me understand the state of teaching and learning at UNT, I invited two of the leading experts in innovation in higher education, Randy Bass and Heidi Elmendorf, to listen to our students, faculty, staff, and academic leaders. Over several months, we surfaced dozens of insights, and we identified many, many dedicated individuals across the university who are already doing amazing work to support our students.

By spring, that work pivoted to a series of design sessions for new support structures for our UNT learning ecosystem, and that includes:

- The Learning Institute, powered by more than fifty UNT learning scientists, to help infuse our work with current insights about how people learn;
- The Teaching Hub, to advance transformative and evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning across our campuses and on every platform; and
- The Curriculum Connector, to help make sure our curriculum will be clearer, more coherent, and aligned with what students need to thrive in their careers and in their lives.

Two things are especially striking about our new university infrastructure, which we call UNT LEEF, for Learning Ecosystem for Empowering Futures. First, these capabilities are very different from what other universities have built, especially our Curriculum Connector with its orientation toward skills students need to thrive after graduation. The second is that all this work has engaged and connected dozens of educators across the university. There is a myth that faculty aren't willing to lead change. At UNT, faculty aren't the problem, they're partners in solutions to develop every student's potential.

We can see the impact of a broadened and personalized approach to student success exemplified in our UNT Athletics program, where our student-athletes are both competing at the highest levels and leading academically. Now, y'all may have heard our football team is 8-1 and in the national conversation. But you may not know that they're also setting new records for the highest team GPA in program history, with a 3.334. That demonstrates

how a culture of excellence, with a combination of high expectations and high support, helps our students thrive.

I am so proud of the scope and pace of our work to improve student success, from analytics to advising to teaching and curriculum. This is an incredible amount of work in less than fifteen months. So, how are we moving so fast? We tackled the hard questions, we built trust, we got behind our innovators, we worked across disciplines and with employers and others across our region and across the country, we built on the best ideas we could find, and we gave ourselves permission to be bold and move fast. No other research university is taking such a comprehensive approach to drive student success.

And we're just getting started.

This year, as we continue to advance our bold vision to develop student potential at UNT, we must also confront another serious issue that is critical not only for our students' success but for our success as an American public research university—the state of civil discourse on our campuses and across our country. This issue is complex, and sometimes uncomfortable, and it pulls against the social media algorithms.

Yet, central to our public responsibilities is the development of our students as adults, colleagues, and citizens who can engage in open and respectful dialogue with people who disagree. Who can listen and who can hear each other, make reasonable and sound arguments, solve problems collaboratively, and regard and treat each other with dignity and respect.

Students tell me they want to discuss events of the day and complex issues they couldn't talk about in high school. The faculty tell me they feel a responsibility to help their students develop essential civic skills. And employers across every sector have told me that among the top workforce-ready skills they seek are employees who can respectfully and productively listen, disagree, and engage in dialogue.

So, today I am announcing a presidential initiative on civil discourse. This initiative will include multiple strands of work, including curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to develop essential civic skills, public events, and faculty training and support. The success of this initiative will depend on students, faculty, staff, and UNT community

members engaging each other, leaning into our shared values, reaching across barriers, and looking beyond labels that divide rather than define us.

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Over the past 135 years, our institution has evolved from the Texas Normal College and Teacher Training Institute to be a leading American research university. We have multiple programs counted among the best in the nation. Today, our mission includes a responsibility to discover new knowledge and insights that contribute to the public good. Our faculty and researchers work at the frontiers of human understanding. They create new solutions and insights, and bridge traditional academic disciplines. This part of our mission also enables unique hands-on learning opportunities for our undergraduate and graduate students.

Since 2023, our research mission has been accelerated by the state's creation of the Texas University Fund. The TUF was established by the legislature and Texas voters with an initial \$3.9 billion endowment, to support the leading Texas public research universities that don't benefit from the Permanent University Fund. There's two levels of support within the TUF, but wisely, the legislature—and the former Commissioner of Higher Education—created a path for a university to earn its way into Level 1, if the university met certain performance criteria two years in a row in federal and private research expenditures, and also, if the legislature appropriated the necessary funding for the TUF.

In fiscal year 2024, UNT cleared the first hurdle for TUF Level 1, with nearly \$50 million in federal and private sponsored research. Last spring, the Texas Legislature did their part—they appropriated another \$1.3 billion for the TUF. So, the pressure was on. Because if we could exceed \$50 million in federal and private research by August 31, we could secure tens of millions every year in additional, dedicated state funding for our research mission. If we failed, we would not be eligible for at least another two years, and we'd have to start all over.

We started the year on target. Then, we lost \$8.7 million in previously awarded federal grants. Given the risk we might not qualify for Level 1, we reached out to our partners at the UNT Foundation, private donors, and philanthropic foundations. We identified nearly \$5 million in private funds that could be repurposed for research, and we set a goal to raise an additional \$5 million in new cash donations in 90 days.

In about 60 days, we hit that target, with the biggest gift coming from new donors to the university, Vikas and Anu Sinha. Our faculty researchers leaned in, submitting a record number of proposals for external funding, working together with our deans and Vice President Pam Padilla.

As we closed the fiscal year, we didn't just meet the performance target. We blew by it, with more than \$55 million in federal and private sponsored research. And we expect that UNT will join Level 1 later this fiscal year. I am so proud of this story because it illustrates the scrappy spirit and intellectual dynamism that distinguishes UNT. We came together with our faculty researchers, university leaders, the UNT Foundation, and our donors. We leaned in, we moved fast, and we got it done.

And we're just getting started.

This incredible achievement will dramatically accelerate our research capabilities and our impact, year after year. In this first year, these additional TUF dollars will also be amplified by the legislature's commitment to meet their final obligations for matching funds for research through the TRIP program, and that added another dedicated \$47 million for UNT research. Over the next five years, we will cut the ribbon on our new 110,000 square foot Science and Technology Building that will increase our research space.

We will build on our strengths in materials science, supply chain and logistics innovation, data science and artificial intelligence, and the science of learning. We'll expand our work in priority areas for the State of Texas related to space and aerospace technologies, semiconductors, cancer, and brain health, working together with our colleagues at UNT Health and other institutions. In each of these areas, we'll expand opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to engage directly in research and discovery and to earn advanced degrees.

We will also address the number one issue that our faculty have identified where we need to improve, and that's support for our doctoral students. As a first step, today I am announcing that we will fund health insurance for all doctoral students on fellowship. We won't wait to do this; we will start immediately by providing funding for the current semester and going forward. Our doctoral students are critical to achieve our aim of

doubling our sponsored research over the next five years, and I am proud to be able to accelerate this support for our graduate students.

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At UNT, our public responsibilities don't end with developing students' talents and discovering new knowledge. We also have a responsibility to drive new opportunities for individuals, for communities, for our region, and beyond. This aspect of our mission gets to the heart of what makes UNT unique. From music to business, from engineering to visual arts, from humanities to sciences, we unleash human creativity to drive progress and build a better tomorrow.

This work takes many different forms. At the university, we're developing an entirely new school within the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences focused on the practical application of the liberal arts, which aligns with skills that are in highest demand by employers. Last year, we increased opportunities for students to receive coaching, support and even seed funding to promote entrepreneurship, working with the Murphy Center in the Ryan College of Business. This year, we'll expand that work to promote and support entrepreneurship across the university, and we'll stand up new university capabilities to support innovation and technology transfer. We have also begun work on a new School of Mathematics and Science Foundations within the College of Science to center innovation and student success at the core of disciplines that feed multiple high-demand career paths.

Across our region and beyond, employers consistently say that their workforce needs are changing faster than they anticipated, in many cases faster than we understand. The largest vulnerability to our continued prosperity, economic competitiveness, and even our national security is the widening mismatch between skills employers increasingly need and the credentials working-age adults currently hold.

For UNT, this situation presents a great challenge: As the pace of change accelerates, how can we develop timely, actionable intelligence to help guide and improve our programs to improve the workforce-ready supply of talent in North Texas? As a major public research university and the largest university within 200 miles, we must take responsibility for our region's talent needs. But we can't do it alone. We could triple the size of the university and still not produce enough graduates for North Texas.

So, with dedicated funding from the Texas Legislature, especially thanks to the advocacy of Senator Brent Hagenbuch, this September we launched the Texas Talent Accelerator. And that initiative includes employers, chambers of commerce, economic development corporations, the Texas State Technical College, community colleges across our region, our friends at Texas Woman's University and UNT Dallas, and our external partners at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, the U.S. Chamber Foundation, Strada Education, and other partners. Together, our founding institutions serve more than 150,000 students each year.

The Texas Talent Accelerator has two broad aims. First, to bring data about job postings, unemployment, salaries, and higher education programs into dialogue with employers, so we can more clearly define workforce-ready skills and distill timely, actionable intelligence about emerging workforce needs and opportunities. At UNT, these are exactly the kinds of insights we need for the Curriculum Connector and decisions about how to improve our courses and degree programs. Second, and even more radically, we aim to coordinate across our institutions, so we can achieve more scale out of our higher education systems to meet high-demand workforce needs.

We look forward to adding more employers and university partners to the Texas Talent Accelerator, as we work together to analyze, understand, and address our region's talent needs. Our willingness to create new models and partnerships and drive change at scale is an important part of what sets UNT apart from more traditional universities.

And we're just getting started.

Of course, we're not just aiming to collect intelligence about regional workforce needs. To realize our bold vision for UNT, we must also accelerate the pace of innovation in how we deliver higher education. This work illustrates the unique value of our Frisco campus.

As part of our strategic planning, we did a deep dive into changing workforce needs across the region, and we worked closely with leaders from the Frisco chamber, the economic development corporation, city, employers, and also our colleagues from Collin College. This year, we will begin to deploy the vision we've developed together.

UNT at Frisco shouldn't just be a campus; it should be a platform for the delivery of courses, programs, experiences, and credentials attuned to Frisco and surrounding communities. Our vision for UNT at Frisco is centered on credit and non-credit programs driven by local demand, especially in healthcare, financial services, entrepreneurship, innovation technologies, and sports, hospitality, and entertainment. In each of these areas, UNT at Frisco programs will be designed for flexibility and ongoing improvement, leveraging the expertise and resources of our core UNT academic colleges. Throughout all of this work, our priorities and programs will be shaped by partnerships with employers, Collin College, our colleagues at UNT Health, and our UNT academic units to deliver high-quality opportunities at scale.

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Across all our work to develop human potential, discover new insights, and drive new opportunities, we are laying an incredibly strong foundation for deep systemic change, to put UNT on a trajectory to realize a new paradigm for American public research universities. This year, we'll launch three key initiatives to help us accelerate our bold vision for the future.

First, we must broaden our recognition of faculty excellence. So much exciting work is underway at UNT. From new approaches to student success to new support structures for curriculum, to teaching to the realignment of entire colleges, we are moving incredibly fast. As I've shared with audiences across the country, one of the key reasons is that our UNT faculty are essential partners. Our work to advance student success isn't being done to or separately from our faculty, it's being done with and accelerated by our faculty innovators. We would not be moving so fast without their creative energy, their ideas, their insights. I'm grateful to our Faculty Senate and faculty leaders for their partnership and hard work. At the same time, we can't ask faculty to do all this ambitious, groundbreaking work at the expense of their own careers.

I regularly host informal meetings with faculty innovators, researchers, and award winners. No agenda, just off-the-record conversations about what they're working on and what they're excited about. At one of these meetings last spring, I was deeply moved by how one of our faculty members talked about her students. She talked about how much she's pushed and supported them, how far they've come, and how proud she is of the internships and jobs they've landed. So, I asked her, does she feel the university honors

that work? And her posture changed. She teared up, and she said, “that’s not my job.” In her unit, whether she’s promoted depends almost entirely on how many pages she’s published, not the broader impact she’s making.

We must do better. We can’t achieve our vision for the future of UNT and fulfill our public responsibilities unless our faculty know the university values excellence across their work to advance our mission. Of course, as a research university we must always continue to value and promote excellent scholarship. We must also value and promote excellence in teaching that powers student success. And we must value the translation of scholarly and educational excellence into innovations, creative contributions, or startups that improve lives.

So, today I am announcing a university initiative to broaden recognition of excellence, innovation, and impact in faculty promotion and tenure. Across the university, we must align our criteria for supporting faculty with our mission. This work has already begun through the Office of the Provost. I want to thank Vice Provost Holly Hutchins for her leadership of this work. I look forward to the results of this important project to make sure every current or potential faculty member knows they will be valued when they do their best work at UNT.

Next, as we work to improve civil discourse across our campuses, we can’t gloss over essential considerations about how we interact with students, with faculty, with visitors, and each other. A few months ago, our Staff Senate leadership brought me a proposal. The university has been providing small grants to individual staff members for professional development. While those are appreciated, they only benefit a few staff members. So, they proposed pooling that small amount of funding to provide training for larger numbers of staff. The issue where they saw as the biggest opportunity was improving customer service. Think about that for a minute and what it says about our community and what it says about our Staff Senate.

Of course, I said no. We shouldn’t redirect funding for staff professional development for something that should be a key priority. Instead, we came together, formed a working group co-chaired by Staff Senate and university leaders and mapped out next steps. Today, I’m announcing we will launch a university initiative on customer service. The first phase of this work will roll out in January. I am so grateful to our Staff Senate leadership for their

partnership in this initiative, especially Alex Ames and Brittany Landau. At UNT, we recognize that every staff member who interacts with students is also an educator who can leave a lasting impression. So this initiative to improve customer service will also powerfully enhance our work to improve student success.

Finally, new funding to develop student talent, potential, and performance. Today, I am announcing a \$100 million campaign to accelerate our vision for student success. Our *Better Look North* campaign will enable us to remove financial barriers to student success with scholarships and targeted efforts to make sure no student goes off track because of minor emergencies or basic needs related to housing or food insecurity. We will accelerate implementation of new advising tools to support every student's timely graduation and invest in our advisors who provide essential human interaction and mentoring. We will bolster resources for student research, career preparation, and athletics performance. We will move faster across every discipline to enhance the value proposition of our degrees, so every UNT graduate can be equipped with knowledge, skills, and transformative experiences that allow them to take their talent as far as they can go. Already, our donors have stepped up to get us nearly halfway to our goal. I'm deeply grateful to them and look forward to the transformative work their generosity will enable for our students.

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These are incredibly dynamic times. The models of higher education that drove American prosperity and progress for 75 years are no longer adequate to meet the needs of the mid-21st Century.

In an era increasingly defined by rapid advances in technology, automation, and artificial intelligence—here, we will develop, discover, and drive human intelligence, insights, and inspiration.

In a moment that demands more talent, education, and opportunity than ever before—here, we are unapologetic in our commitment to advance excellence, innovation, and access.

In times of great uncertainty about the future of American higher education—here, we're ready to adapt, innovate, persevere, and lead the way forward.

The plan, the commitments, the campaign we announce today send a powerful message to our region, to the State of Texas, and beyond.

That this is where futures take shape, where we transform inspiration into impact, where we guide grit to greatness.

That we will set a new standard, to create enduring value for our students, employers, our region, our state, our nation—to create enduring value for the public good.

That this is who we are. We're just getting started, and you Better Look North.

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