



2019 State of the University Address
Sept. 12, 2019

[UNT 2019 State of the University Welcome video plays](#)

[UNT's Originality and Perseverance on Display video plays](#)

President Neal Smatresk

Well, welcome and thank you for coming to my sixth annual State of the University address. I can't tell you how pleased I am to be here to share with you the incredible progress that we've made this year. It's really truly been a record-breaking year, but before I get going, I just want to give a quick shout-out to Lesa Roe, who can't be here but is watching by streaming video. Hi, Lesa.

As you saw in the video, it's been an incredible year. We set records in everything that we set our minds to. That's not an accident. That's something that happened because people pulled together and they tried hard to do what we have to do, which is to make our students successful and to make this university successful. So I want to thank all of you, because it took our faculty, our staff, our students, our donors, corporate partners, governmental officials, all working together as a team to really help us move the ball forward. And this has been the best team it's ever been my pleasure to work with. So a big round of applause to thank all of you who have worked so hard for us.

Now today what I want to do is not only celebrate our many accomplishments, but talk about the plans that we have for moving forward. So it's going to be a little bit different kind of State of the University. We're going to celebrate hard, but for a very short period of time, and then I'm going to move on and talk to you about what we came up with in an intensive year of planning for the next five years that can send us further on our trip up to the top of the mountain and university reputation. So let's reiterate a few of our really major events.

Note: President Smatresk gave his address in conjunction with a visual presentation.
[Download the presentation from the 2019 State of the University address.](#)

First, we welcomed 116 faculty this year. This is a record number. It's great. It's about 10 percent of our total faculty population. They came here because they wanted to be part of a Tier One institution and they wanted to be part of a caring community, and those messages really resonate with people. We raised nearly \$75 million in research expenditures this year. That, too, is a record.

We brought in over \$60 million in gifts and pledges. This is a staggering number. Let's put this in perspective. When I first got here, we were averaging \$15 to \$17 million a year. Last year at \$34 million, we thought we'd died and gone to heaven. This year we hit \$60 million. Now most of you know why. We received a nice little gift from Brint Ryan, the former chairman of our board, who gave us \$30 million to name the G. Brint Ryan College of Business. I know if Marilyn Wiley is in the audience, she's still brimming with joy. While that's great, I want you to kind of reverse that. That means that we raised \$30 million of baseline giving without a giant gift, from the likes of some of the great donors who are sitting down here with us today, folks like Dan Smith, the McNatt family, the Newmans. We have a bundle of really good-hearted people who have been contributing to the success of our students and to this university, and we thank you for that.

We graduated over 9,600 students, and there's different counting methodologies. I could have said 9,700, but I'm not going to. What I'll tell you is that that's a record number for this university, and we're really proud. We're graduating almost 25 percent of our students every single year, and the faster we graduate our students, the less debt they have and the faster they get into the workforce so they can pay that debt off. And some of the best news, our enrollment this year topped 39,000, 39,320 at last count, which is a phenomenal number given how many students we graduated. This is about 1,200 students more than we had last year and it was a great problem to have, because we raised our freshman enrollment year over year 15 percent. That's a stunning number. We welcomed the largest ever entering freshman class of 5,300 students. And I'll talk to you about some of the challenges that that created for us in a little bit. Our transfer enrollment increased by seven percent, and our graduate enrollment overall increased by eight percent, 10 percent growth of master's student population. So overall we accepted the largest entering class that we've ever seen, and at 39,300 we're within a stone's throw of 40,000, a target that we thought we'd achieve here in the next few years.

Retention and our four and six year graduation rates have also made giant changes. Our first year retention, a number commonly measured around the country as one of the indicators of school quality, is pushing our FY22 numbers, numbers for three years from now, at about 79 .5 percent. So a little, if we'd saved, according to Jason, if we'd saved 30 more students, we would've hit 80 percent first year retention. Jason, go find those students and get them enrolled, please. This number really puts us in the ranks of the best publics in the country, and yet we believe we have room to run still. Our four year graduation rate, and here's one of the biggest stories of the year, increased 4.25 percent to hit our FY22 goal within rounding error. Our FY22 goal was 40 percent. We hit 39.99 percent, so this is a phenomenal number and it's another number that people use on a national basis to understand the quality of an institution.

Our six year graduation rate also improved to about 57.5 percent, our goal at 60 percent. We're closing in on goals by helping our students to succeed. Last year, we had a huge push around retention. It was the top initiative. And I believe you'll remember me saying, we go the extra distance to help our students succeed, and so what I have to say to everybody here who helped to contribute that, whether you gave a

scholarship, whether you helped a student with financial aid, whether you were in class and you reached out to that one student who was stumbling a little bit, you really made a big difference. And it shows the power of what a caring community can do, so congratulations to you. I owe huge thanks to what you've all done to move those numbers and to help us be a better university. Now, we didn't just grow in size, we also grew in quality. Our entering student characteristics improved this year, and we welcomed 32 new National Merit Scholars for a total now of 93. Remember, the first year I was here there were four. And so we've come a long way as establishing ourselves as a top quality first choice institution.

Last year we decided we'd talk about who we were, what our identity was, and we came up with three words that resonated with our entire community, and you've heard me use these words before. We're creative. I think there's no question we're one of the most creative schools in the country, certainly in Texas. We care. This is the word that strikes at all of our heart chords. I don't know a faculty member or staff member who didn't say yeah, that's us. And that caring attribute is something that you just can't replicate, and I haven't seen anywhere else I've ever been.

And finally we have resilience. Not only as an institution are we resilient, able to get up from some of the tough times we had when I first got here, but we are resilient in our student population. You know, we're training a first generation population. Some of these students don't even know that they can go to school and they're afraid of failure. Well, what we're doing is we're trying to teach them that it's OK, they can come here, they can make it, and that if they fail, they get back up on their feet, they dust themselves off, and they try again, and we're here to help.

So how do we take creative, caring, and resilient and weave them into the reason we're here, our mission, and our vision for the university? And so we went out, and we listened, and we edited, and we had about a long paragraph mission, and it looked like everybody had something to add to it. And we said that's too much. Let's get it down to a sentence that we can all work on and celebrate. And so here's our mission. At the University of North Texas, our caring and creative community empowers students to thrive in a rapidly changing world. And the more we put this phrase out, after many people contributed, the more it seems to resonate. It's what we do and it's who we are. And our vision is that we will become globally known for collaborative and imaginative educational innovation and scholarly activity that benefits the world around us and transforms our students.

So we now ask a simple question. After a banner year of achievement, what do we do next? Where are we going? And so we went out and we listened to 56 academic departments and every single staff unit on campus. Everyone who cared to had the opportunity to contribute, and we asked them some simple questions. What do you do really well? What are you most proud of about this university? And what can we do better, and how can we serve our students as we go forward? And we took the comments that were given to us and we turned them into a very straightforward strategic plan that will map our course for the next five years.

We said student empowerment is the most important thing that we do, encouraging their success, but we can't do that unless we build better people and processes, unless our culture and our culture of collaboration, and our teamwork improves. And finally, we need to continue our growth as a scholarly and research institution and build our reputation so that we can transmit that to our students, so that they in turn will grow and do better. So while we have these three planks to the strategic planning platform,

we also recognized one other thing. In an age where universities are being asked to change more rapidly than ever, where there's a lot of pressure on public institutions to do better with less, we can't get to where we need to go without building a culture of collaboration. And I'll say it starts from caring, but now it becomes a discipline, where we learn how to work together and work with our system colleagues to really move ourselves up.

So let's now turn our attention to scholarly activity and innovation. And as I present this, you're going to see some goals, a few initiatives that attach to the goals, not all of them, because there's way too many. And then you're going to see some metrics that we use. The metrics that we're going to use in some cases are the same metrics that you've seen before. What are your research output? How many students did you graduate? Commonly used metrics to measure university progress. Some of them are harder than that. They embody soft measurements around students, their well-being, their mental health, how engaged they are. Those will, I'm going to call formative. Over the year, we're going to gather up the tools that we have and figure out ways in which we can develop qualitative and quantitative indices of how we're moving.

So for scholarly activity, we will support, communicate, and celebrate a dedicated culture of scholarly activity at UNT to expand our impact on our students and the world around us. Two major initiatives. The first is using the Carnegie ranking system and what we know about the variables that drive academic reputation. How are we going to move up? If we use those as a guide, we will move into the top ranks of institutions on a national level. And the second is how do we strengthen our basic research and scholarly output and our innovative frame? So let's take a look at a couple of these and look at the metrics that we're going to use in order to measure ourselves.

This year, as I said, we are measuring our total research expenditures. This is inside baseball. We're using something called the NSF HERD measurement, right Rosemary? She's chuckling because we're debating this. The NSF HERD measurement's a nationally normed measurement that is used by places like *U.S. News and World Report* and the Carnegie system to understand how well you're doing in terms of research expenditures. We want to move it from \$75M to about \$100M. We're going to improve our scholarly activity, and of course doctoral students turn out to be critical to our success in the Carnegie ranking system. And we're going to continue to move towards graduating 300 or 300-plus students a year over the next few years.

So I would like now to say there's a brief video narrated by our provost, Jennifer Cowley. She's done some good work in this area, that describes what it really means to be a Tier One institution and how our move up the mountain has occurred over the past few years.

[R1 Our Way: Staying True to Our UNT Identity video plays](#)

I hope now that you all have a little bit better idea of what it means to be an R1 institution. And I've heard some people go, "Well, you're not really an R1 institution." The answer's, "Yes, we are. And we're a darn good R1 institution. And we're going to keep moving up, but we're going to do it our way." So let's talk about how that might continue.

Just to reiterate what Jennifer said in this slideshow, not only does R1 influence our rankings, in places like *U.S. News Report*, but it also is critical for recruiting the best faculty and the best students. That's why we have 32 new National Merits this year. R1 matters. So we can't be content to sit on the boundaries of R1, having just gotten in. We need to keep hiking up the mountain. Let's see if I can make the laser pointer work. I'm going to explain this graph because it's a little bit on the steep side.

First you see a whole bunch of purple dots right here, or at least you should be able to. The purple dots represent, each one of these dots represents an institution in the R2 category. That's where we came from. Our progress from down here in R3, through the years took us through each of what you might call the mountain base camps, up to the edge of the R1 category. The red dots are the fourth quartile; gray dots, third; orange, second; and the blue dots are the top, the first quartile of the R1 institutions. By the way, fun fact. Of the nine institutions that have moved from R3 to R1 in the last 25 years, I've been at three of them. Not sure what that means, but it's good news for all of us.

OK, so you see some green dots here, and these green dots represent some of the discrete changes that we've made to continue our climb from the fourth quartile. Because when you first get there, you're in the bottom of the fourth quartile. That's the natural path of anything. How do we move up? Well, we're going to increase our research expenditures, which we've done through great programs like the Center for Adaptive Agile and Additive Manufacturing. And I'm going to give a big shout out to Representative Lynn Stucky. Thank you, and Pat Fallon, so much for making sure that we received that money. It's going to really move the needle for us.

And as you heard two years ago, we added 100 new doctoral lines. It's really funny. I was talking to our new VPRI and he goes, "Yeah, when I was at Utah we made a really big R1 move. We added 10 lines." And I went, "Really? Yeah, we added a hundred." Those hundred new lines are going to be what continues to propel us up in the ranks. And they're going to be lines across the university. Lest people fear they are only going into one specific area. And finally, we have continued strengths in the social sciences, as what's called non-STEM research funding. And we have continued strength in doctoral production in the arts and humanities. The professions that allow us to propel our journey.

So in this first counting period, we were right on the edge. In the next counting period, we'll be somewhere in here. And by the subsequent year we hope that we will be broaching the edge of the third quartile. And in 10 years we plan on plunking ourselves right down in the middle of the R1 category. So you might ask what's it look like when you get to that neighborhood? Here's what it looks like. Take a look at some of the institutions that we're going to be joining, as we continue our climb. This is something I find very hopeful and exciting, and while I don't normally like to PR other institutions, I'll submit to you that we'll be a good company.

Let's now take a look at what R1 our way means. There's a great chase for science and engineering funding, and there's a lot of universities that actually produce more STEM research funding than we do, who earned R1 because they haven't balanced themselves out. And just because everybody's on a great chase for research dollars doesn't mean that has to be a path that we pursue. So as we move up, it doesn't mean we're going to become like everyone else. We're going to continue to excel as a comprehensive university. Building strengths in the arts, humanities, social sciences, professional programs, and the

STEM disciplines. And we will celebrate the creativity our campus is so well known for. So we're going to move up in R1 our way. And I think it's going to be a really exciting journey for us.

Finally, there's a whole lot of other things that we have to do if we're going to continue to build research strengths. And many of them have to do with the fact that we're still not producing the kinds of research dollars that we should for a university of our size. So we're going to emphasize multi-investigator multidisciplinary proposals. Multi-investigator proposals tend to be bigger, bring in more money, and really move the needle for us. We're going to work with other universities, vigorously, to gain access to large scale national grants from federal funding agencies. We're going to really move on increasing our corporate research, and our cooperation and collaboration. You're going to hear me use the word corporate quite a bit through this talk. It's a hole in our portfolio, and the advantage is that working with the corporate world, we can solve real world problems, and push our students into better employment pathways once they understand how to move.

One of the ways we need to improve is by providing more mentoring and support for our graduate students, and one of the ways we'll do that is through the acquisition of more endowed chairs. Endowed chairs are researchers that have absolutely impeccable credentials, that they're nationally and internationally known and respected. We believe that endowed chairs help us to recruit the best graduate students, and transmit their knowledge to undergraduate populations about the cutting edge research that they're doing. And thereby the six endowed chairs that we'll be getting, for example in the College of Business, will really change our reputation, will change the course for us in terms of graduate student production.

One problem that we have, one weak link in the chain, is that we don't have enough built research space on our campus. Now, a couple of years ago, we finished a renovation of our Science Research Building. We have a second phase of that that we're going to have to figure out how to finish. And we also, this year, made extra space out at Discovery Park for our fastest growing research oriented program, our biomedical engineering program. We added 27,000 square feet. And while most people think, "Fine. You added some research and classroom space." I don't want you to think about it that way. Biomedical engineering is one of the hottest disciplines. Its work is offering incredible benefits to millions and millions of people. That space is an idea factory. That space will generate innovation that will grow our economy and support the world around us.

Finally, when I first got here, can any of you guess how many licensing dollars we were producing? If the first and second numbers were zero, you'd be guessing about right? Two years ago we began to move up again. We generated \$40,000 in licensing. We were like, "Great." Last year, we generated \$400,000 in licensing. We're moving and we're moving yet faster, especially with our new incubation activities out at Inspire Park, in the city of Frisco. So we're going to keep moving the great ideas that our faculty have, and translate them into the public so that they can benefit the world around us.

Now let's switch gears and talk about the second plank of our planning platform. Changing our culture, people, and processes. People say culture eats strategy for lunch, so if you're going to have a strategic plan, you better have a culture change plan to go along with it. And I'm blessed because I get to work with some of the most collaborative caring people in the world. And I think that it's going to make it a lot easier for us to reach our goals. Our goal is to attract, develop, and celebrate a campus community to

make UNT an outstanding environment to work and learn. We have a few things we're going to work on and I'm going to peel the onion on some of these.

We're going to work together to improve our processes, build customer service, and communicate our successes. We need to work on processes that improve our enrollment, and our enrollment management experiences for our students, whether it's using a customer relations management system or whether it's creating a more seamless, Amazon Prime kind of interface, so that students can bite. "Did you like that course? We'll add another one to the basket and we'll give you some reminders in the next few days." We need to make sure that we decrease time to graduation by continuing to work vigorously to improve the pathways, make courses available, and make sure, finally, that our students are retained, and that we become a best place to work. Why do we want to be a best place to work? Because as I've said many times before, universities aren't made of bricks and mortar. They're made of people. And when you keep the best people, you get the best results.

So some metrics that go along with this are formative because some of these things are a little bit trickier to measure, but we're going to measure a number of student success pathway indicators. We're going to keep pushing poor old David Wolf to raise more money in baseline funding. While we got \$60 million this year, I would like to see that we get crawling up to that baseline of \$40 million, and every once in a while you get a pop, with a great big gift. So nope, no sweat, David. I'd like to see that we continue to work. Yes. C. Dan, Don Potts, I see him back there. You can help in this process. Our UNT culture, and faculty and staff engagement, needs to continue to improve. We're measuring that with our Gallup scores right now, and we're doing a lot to build our culture. One of the big things here is that we need to learn how to limit the increases in student debt. This is a national issue, and we're dedicated to making sure that our students can graduate in a timely fashion, and limit their debt. And this I think is going to be a growing concern on a national level.

So there's a million action steps. I'm going to just touch some of the high points. We're committed to working better with our system to improve our efficiency and effectiveness, and to cut costs in the delivery of our services. We're going to collaborate with each other to eliminate something unaffectionately referred to as the UNT runaround. We're going to streamline our operations and communications, and make sure that we're not just providing a great experience for our students, but we're providing great experiences for each other. We're going to expand our mentoring, and professional development, and build teams. We are, after all, a team of teams, and we need to learn how to work that way and to coordinate our activities, so that we can work seamlessly across the silos that often hamstring our efforts to improve.

We're going to improve the student user experience. I told you create that Amazon Prime kind of experience, and we're going to make sure that we decrease time to graduation. I want to highlight one of the innovative programs. I'm going to give Bob Brown a little credit here. It's called Save and Soar. Clever name. Oh, not Bob, but Joey Saxon. Thank you, Joey. The Save and Soar program says if you pay a certain sum, you get deeply discounted winter and summer semesters. And if you utilize those winter and summer semesters, you can graduate in three years. So you get discounts off of your normal tuition rates and you graduate faster. And a lot of the expensive college education isn't just your tuition and fees. A lot of the expense is living expenses, driving, having a residence, eating. So we believe that as we get students to graduate faster and faster, we'll be able to help limit their debt.

You know our Mean Green family is really so good at being caring. And the people and process plank in the strategic planning platform is where caring really shines through. If we care, how does that translate to what we do, and how we treat each other, and how we treat our students? And so I thought I'd show you a video that talks a little bit about how some of our students are in, excuse me, our faculty, and our staff, and administration care, for our students. And whether it's move-in day with everyone getting sweaty, helping students move up to their residence hall rooms. Or whether it's the first day of class with hundreds of our faculty and staff wearing Ask Me shirts. And what is it, Bob, extreme friendliness? Extreme Friendliness shirts to help our students find their way to class, and kind of de-stress them a little along the way. Let's take a look at what some of our faculty and staff say about how they care.

We Care video plays

All right. It's really heartwarming to me to see the community come out and show how they care. And I think that over the past few years we've seen it time and again. Where someone has a simple idea that can really change how a student interacts with our campus and can engage them more deeply. And this is something that we encourage. We encourage people to contribute to making us a better place through caring. Thank all of you. Who cares so much. Now, that's worth applauding for.

Now let's talk about a unique take on campus master planning. You know campus master planning is normally someone gets an aerial photograph, and a bunch of consultants come in, and they tell you how to move traffic around, and how to plan for growth, and how to plunk a couple more buildings down on those squares in the map where there isn't anything yet, or knock something down. Right Bob? Yeah. That's not very exciting. That's not what we want to do. Campus master planning should embrace our identity, should embrace what we're trying to achieve for our students and how we're going to engage them on our campus, and should also look at the amazingly disruptive forces that are influencing higher education now. Whether it's online education, artificial intelligence, how you build a campus that can house students, and move them along more quickly, and make sure that they stay here. We have a number of challenges that we face.

So this year instead of using it like it's a map game, we're going to have a very serious effort around campus master planning where we envision what the campus of 2050 looks like. And maybe beyond. And it's going to engage many of the stakeholders here on our campus. We're going to have to have a serious conversation about how we grow, what we do, how we serve our students, what kinds of technology will influence them, and how, most importantly, we can ensure their success. And so I'm very excited about this project and I'm going to give you one example of how we have to think in a very connected way, a networked way around campus master planning.

This year we opened up Joe Greene Hall, 550 new beds. I know that we all sat there chewing our fingernails going, "I wonder if we can fill those beds? Wonder if we're going to make it?" Not only did we fill them with 15 percent more freshmen, we actually had to turn sophomores away. Now, that's not an ideal circumstance, but are we going to become a more residential campus? How will online education influence what we're doing? How do we accommodate the needs of students who want to be housed on campus? And if we do house them, how do we do some relatively basic things like feed them? So we have to take a really good look at things like dining services, and is it just an old fashioned dining hall? You know, you walked down the cafeteria line, and someone plops something down in your

plate. Well, that's not us. We are, after all, ranked by Delish.com as the second best food in the country, and it escapes me why we're not first best.

Once we build this facility, we're going straight to the top. This is a facility that's the new dining hall, this right across from our Welcome Center. How many of you have seen the Welcome Center? Yeah. If you haven't, I urge you to take a moment today to go by the Welcome Center and visit it. It is clearly the most beautiful building on campus and a wonderful way to welcome students by showing them our Mean Green Pride. Right across the street, we're going to put this facility up. It's under construction right now. It's a new dining hall modeled after Legacy Hall in Plano, which is a very kind of avant-garde food opportunity. And what is it for? It's an opportunity for students not just to get good food but to engage, to network, to study, to meet, to interact. And so how do you plan campus spaces as you go forward? What are the important elements and this is certainly one of the ways we have to think about how we engage our students.

Now we also are master planning our campus in Frisco. A lot of that has been done in terms of basic layout, but the process is still continuing with our great partners from Frisco. This is a conceptual artist rendering of the new nature center, that we hope we can partner with Frisco on to build and operate. And in the distance you can see the first building and a Hurley Hall bell tower that will evoke the connection of that campus to our campus. People in Frisco wanted to know it was a campus. They wanted a traditional feel. That doesn't mean the education's going to be traditional. So how we build and accommodate corporate partnerships, how we engage the region around us, is going to be very important.

These are the kinds of master planning issues that we really need to embrace as we move forward so that we spend our money in a way that has the maximum impact for our students. And as we talk about corporations and corporate partnerships, we have a growing constellation of partners and you can see some of them here. By the way, I'm glad to welcome some of our partners from the PGA, from the Cowboys, from Cisco, from Toyota, and other places. This is not a complete list, by the way, it's the ones that conveniently fit on the screen so that you could see them. We are going to continue to grow our corporate partnerships because they help to inform our education. They help to provide opportunities for our students. And they provide opportunities for our researchers, and the people who are trying to move forward in each of these organizations, to do a better job.

Let's take an example right now and I want to focus on one specific activity, but it's a broad one. About a year ago, folks from Cisco, who are sitting in the audience, thanks guys, came out and they said, "We're an outreach component of Cisco that works with nonprofits, governmental entities, and universities to help them solve some of their problems and work more effectively." This is a little bit similar to what the Toyota Production System did, but maybe with a broader scope of activity. They went and interviewed somewhere between 40 and 50 stakeholders, over the course of the past year. And they said, we said, "What are you going to do? What should we do together?" And we tossed out a bunch of ideas. And the idea that resonated was that we would begin to try to create a sustainable student success ecosystem, that built pathways that continued to improve how our students engaged in our campus and did over a period of years?

What they generated in response was a comprehensive outline of a plan that we're going to execute. "So our student success priorities," they said, "should break down into four major categories." And well, they're a little bit tricky to see. The first is that we need a digital strategy that enhances the customer experience. You've heard me talk about this. We need to make sure that it's easy for students to use technology to gain access to what they need. Whether they're coming to our campus, registering for classes, paying bills, or being engaged in their classes. Secondly, it's time for higher ed big data. I'm going to talk a little bit more about this shortly, but we need to make data informed decisions. And those decisions, collectively, will help us to embrace a better student experience. A student experience in which we improve the academic, intellectual, social, and emotional development of our students. And that may sound funny to you, but we know from a great deal of research that the better we do this, the greater a student's chances of success will be when they leave us. And the better sense of wellbeing that they will have throughout their life. So we're not here just to graduate, then we're here to make sure that they have a great life journey. Finally, it's going to take everybody in the pool. Students, faculty, staff, and our alumni, building networks that help to engage our students in meaningful activities, and build connections for them so that when they graduate they are part of a total ecosystem.

Now, I was a little daunted when they presented this plan because they said, "And all this takes is 26 solution initiatives?" And I went "26. OK." Each one of those, by the way, it breaks down into multiple parts, like create a sustainable continued success model. Tell me how to do that. Anyhow, so what we did was we took a look at these 26 steps and we said, "This plan isn't going to happen in a year. This is going to roll out over the course of our entire planning project. It'll be about a five-year project." And our student success roadmap has things we're going to work on this year and over the next five years. I'm not going to go through the steps with you. What I'll say is this lays out the project management format, we can now track it and implement it. And when we're done, what should we have? A sustainable student success ecosystem that ensures great lifestyle and life cycles for our students so that they can be successful, not just here, but long after they graduate. I'm very excited about this.

Now, we're talking about students, so let's move on to the final plank of the planning platform and talk about how we're going to empower our students. Our goals will be to empower and transform our students in their educational and social environments to set them up for lifelong learning success. I think you heard me just say that. A number of things have to be done for us to do this well.

First, we really have to develop innovative programming to make sure that the skills that our students are going to need through their life, the engagement that they have on their campus, and what corporations are telling us, will make them successful in careers of the 21st century. We're going to have to expand our students' ability to believe they can. Think about this. We have a lot of first-generation students. They come here, not sure if they can be successful. How do you instill a growth mindset and resilience in your student population and create for them then a sense of comfort and well-being during their experience?

We also need to collaborate better, as I've said before, across all of our boundaries to work together to discover the weak links in our system so that we can make sure students are going to be successful. And of course we're never going to take our eye off the ball of improving retention. Retention is a critical factor. If we don't retain them, we can't give them a chance to get out into the job market and help our economy as best they could.

We have a number of metrics attached to this, I'm not going to belabor them. Of course, retention is important. One of the ones that I think is really critical here is how we track our students' career development, and how we then backwards calibrate with the companies they're working for to make sure that we're doing a good job. And again, along in here and along in people and processes, we need to talk about how we limit student debt, because this is an important variable that contributes to non-retention in many of our students.

Well, now I want to flip to another partner that we have, the Education Advisory Board. The Education Advisory Board has been using big data to try to improve student success for a long time. In fact, they've done this across the country. We didn't have the right kind of data sets when I first got here. But now, with the insights data that we've generated, we're able to provide EAB with the big data they need to plug into their system to use predictive analytics to help us identify and remediate at-risk students, and to create a whole ecosystem of alumni, faculty, and students who can support each other, feed information back and forth to each other, and thereby create a greater level of awareness of when a student's heading for the cliff. So this is a big data effort in partnership with the Education Advisory Board that allows us to use predictive analytics to help our students to track their success. And it's probably going to be the biggest single initiative that we have this year. It's going to be a very broad-based thing. It'll influence student affairs, academic affairs, enrollment management, and most of the sectors across our campus. So I'm excited about this. And everywhere EAB has gone, and they've worked with willing partners, the retention rates have risen dramatically. So rising from the high level that we are now will certainly put us in the ranks of elite public institutions on a national level.

A number of other steps will be taken. We're going to expand internships and research experiences. I've talked about corporations. A corporation will take a student with a one point lower GPA if they've had an internship. Internships matter. We need to continually find more corporate partners to make sure our students can move out into the world and gain access to the best jobs.

We're going to have to use workforce data and corporate intelligence to build new smart degree programs, programs like consumer experience. In Frisco, our big data analytics programs are booming because everybody needs access to better data to guide the progress of their companies. We're also going to develop what I call custom-built or built-to-suit degree programs. For example, a new program that we've just started won a contract from the Cinemark Corporation, and Cinemark said, "We need a special blend for our employees. And if you do, we're going to push this program so that they take it." And under Adam Fein's leadership, we built a program that has business competencies and hospitality competencies broken into it to serve the over 3,000 employees of Cinemark who might still be able to advance now and get their college degrees in online programming.

This and other types of activities, for example, we're the first to market with a BAAS degree with Coursera. Now, Coursera is one of the largest online providers in the world. And we've hitched our wagon to a star with this one. The BAAS degree is a completion degree for people who have accumulated a number of college credits and don't know what to do with them, and can't quite graduate. In America, there are 34 million people who have checked out of college with a bunch of college credit and still need to make sure that they have a chance to move up. And I think this is also, not just an innovative program that I think is going to garner national and international respect for us, I think, more importantly, it's what you do when you care, what you do when people feel like they don't know where

to go next. We're going to be offering alternatives that can make them stronger and better moving forward.

We're going to also have to work hard as we become increasingly a minority serving institution. We're already a minority majority institution. We're on the cusp of becoming a Hispanic serving institution. I'm still waiting for the data to roll in because it's a little more complex than just counting heads, but we have a growing Hispanic population. Well, if we're going to do that and get more and more first-generation students as well, we need to improve the cultural competence of our campus so that we're treating first-generation students and ethnic minorities with the kind of care and support that will help them in their path to academic success. And I've already mentioned to you that student mental health, a growing problem in the United States, and well-being is important, and that we need to encourage a resilient and growth mindset in our students to make sure that they're most successful.

Now, finally, I want to move to one program that just tickles me. I'm just going to say it right now, and I'm getting a little verklempt here, I've tried at the University of Texas at Arlington, I tried at the University of Hawaii, I tried at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas to get a program like this put in place, and the cultural barriers were just so steep. And so, when I got here, I said, "We're going to do some innovative programming." I want to see courses taught in a cohorted fashion to our students, where we don't worry about the title of the course and you just check it off the list, where the title of the course combines to help the students gain those qualitative and quantitative skills that they need, the competencies that industries look for, and that we take this course and really create students who understand why they're learning, as opposed to taking courses that they don't figure will benefit them until five years later.

How do you do that? So we started working on this because Frisco is also, not just a great dynamic business community, but Frisco is a test bed, because it's new. This year we welcomed 25 students to a new program. They are our Frisco founding freshmen. Say that three times fast. These 25 students are so darn excited about what they're going to be getting and the classes that they're going to take, and I am too. In fact, I'm so excited, I've even offered to go out there and teach, although they said they're not sure they need me.

So what are the principles of this? First, this is a cohort-based approach. They take all their classes together for two years. Second, it's project-specific. It's about project design and analysis. So every single entering group and every single cohort will have a specific project. This year's is about mobility, autonomy, and the Drive AI project that is so important right now in Frisco. I mean, we all know that autonomous vehicles are going to be the path of the future. What does it mean to a city? How does a city grow and thrive when you take this into account? So this is theme that connects everything that our students will do to learn together. They're going to learn not only those basic soft skills that all employers expect, but they're going to be getting some real applied coursework in project implementation, design thinking, operations, research and analysis.

And finally, they're going to get classes taught by executives and CEOs of the companies that they might one day go to work for. And every summer they'll have an internship. So if they take an internship every summer in this cohorted program, they'll not only be more employable, they'll graduate in three years. This is a true degree in three. This is innovative. Cut costs, get our students ready to take

leadership positions in growing areas, and offer them something that will change their approach to education and our approach to education for years to come. Really excited about it, and I look forward to celebrating their many successes next year.

Now, one thing I have to say, as we move away, because I can't just keep giving you all the tidbits, it'd take forever, as we move away from just the expose of what this plan entails and the action steps that we're going to follow, what you need to know is that today you've just seen the tip of the iceberg. This is a comprehensive plan. If we are disciplined, and we work collaboratively, and we work as a team, it's going to move our institution forward and promote student success.

But I hope what you saw today is that this entire plan is in the service of our mission. Every single thing we talked about ultimately comes back to our students. So let's titrate what I just said against our mission statement one final time. At the University of North Texas, our caring and creative community empowers our students to thrive in a rapidly changing world. I hope you saw that in this plan today. I hope you felt that that was the case. So at the end of the day, this plan will transform our students, but we're going to have to transform ourselves in order to transform our students. And that is going to take everybody contributing.

So let's remind ourselves a little bit about what the student journey is like. Let's take a look in the next video at how our freshmen feel they're going to be changed and what they're hoping for from an education, and how some of our seniors and recent alum, how they feel they have been changed by the education that they received.

Transforming Lives video plays

I never get tired of hearing from our students. And it's so funny, yesterday I was shopping for some T-shirts to take to the Cal game, and I ran into Allison, not quite recognizing her, and she saw me, and she goes, "You're a celebrity." And I went, "No, no, you're the celebrity." And she goes, "You're just here shopping." And I went, "Yeah, I am." But I talked to her a little bit about her journey here, and she said she had some amazing professors. And by getting into research, it opened up doors for her that she never knew were closed. And as I talked further to her, I said, "Why are you going into neuroscience? I did a little neuroscience in my time." And she goes, "Well, my mother has a neurodegenerative disease that I've inherited, and what I'd really love is to work on neurodegenerative diseases and help people who have these kinds of conditions." And so, she's taken that caring, and her research, and her creativity, and she's going to thrive. I'm really impressed with our students and what character they develop as they leave this institution.

Well, in the introductory video today, you heard some of the amazing success stories of our alumni, folks like Wendy Zomnir, Dustee Jenkins, Brint Ryan. Most of these folks didn't come from really affluent backgrounds. They came from humble origins. They probably didn't know what they were going to do when they hit school, but with care, mentoring, and guidance, they transformed themselves into doing something amazing, folks who achieve at the highest level. We see this story repeated over, and over, and over again at this institution, and it's the thing that makes me most proud. It's one thing to take super smart students and give them a pat on the back and congratulate them as they go on to do

great things. It's another thing to take students who might not ever have a chance and make sure that they get the best chance possible to thrive in the world.

I'd like to introduce to you one of our current students who has a kind of a similar success story, someone who's in the entrepreneurship program in the G. Brint Ryan College of Business, someone who was passed over a little bit by a number of universities and he was worried whether he could pursue his dream and get the education that he needed the right way. This man's from a little town in Oklahoma, Peggs, Oklahoma. And UNT saw something in him, a spark of greatness. And in his time here, he's shown himself to be a great student, a great leader, and a great athlete who's become nationally known. I'd like to welcome to the stage Mason Fine.

How are you doing, Mason?

Testing, one, two, three. Good, we got contact. OK, Mason, what I'd love for you to do is show some of that incredible form that you've developed, as you said, passing records in the NCAA, by a really challenging activity. Can you toss some T-shirts out to the crowd? You toss those T-shirts, and I want to show you what these are. Mason, we made these for Mason. What this is, is Mason, who has a goal of becoming a great leader in the Cherokee community, spells the phrase UNT in Cherokee. And so, for those of you lucky enough to get these, they're keepsakes you should remember forever.

[Throwing of T-shirts into the audience.]

Keep going. Yeah, I get to embarrass myself now. OK, way out back there, here we go. Oh, perfect spiral. Did you see that, Mason? Here we go. Oh yeah, make it look easy. Here's one more. Yep. Oh, hold it. I blew it. OK, deep, go deep. Oh yeah. I'm not going to try to beat that one. OK. That was really a lot of fun. But Mason, I have something serious to ask you. What's your time at UNT meant to you?

Mason Fine

That's a good question. UNT has meant the world to me. This university has given me an opportunity to continue to chase my dream. And since arriving on campus, I've been surrounded with such great people and so many mentors that have educated me at how to be a better man. And I am truly honored to be a part of this Mean Green family.

President Neal Smatresk

And we're truly honored to have you. Thank you so much. Now, I know you have to get ready for the Cal game. We're going to go, we're going to be screaming loud, and we all want you to know that we're incredibly proud of you. We're incredibly proud of the team. And good luck tomorrow ... or good luck Saturday.

Mason Fine

Thank you. I appreciate that. Go Mean Green.

President Neal Smatresk

All right, Go Mean Green. Thanks. Well, as I've said a couple times ... Boy, that's hard to top, huh? Just get some more T-shirts and then we can all go. We had a breakout year, and working together, we've really moved UNT forward. And I'm really proud that we continue our ascent up the mountain of success. That success today, and I've got to repeat this, is due to all of you, is due to the folks in the audience, our faculty, staff, students, administrators, and our community partners. You're amazing. And I am in awe of you, because I've never seen an institution gather together and move so fast and become so dynamic. And that is critical. So I'm honored to serve you. And I just think that, working together, we can achieve anything that we want.

Now, we can't sit on our laurels. We can't say, "Things are fine right now." We're in this age of disruption. Universities across the country are being challenged to innovate, adapt, and change in ways that are really going to help us provide better futures, not just for our students, but for our whole regions and communities. And we have to do that with shrinking resources.

The plan I outlined for you today is comprehensive, and it's ambitious. And we're going to be tackling some tough issues, issues a lot of other schools won't go after because they're hard to measure, they're hard to quantify, well, they take time, and attention, and culture change. And that's scary stuff. It's going to require our very best creative efforts. It won't be easy, and it will take total commitment from a very caring campus. But I know you, I know what you can do. And I believe we're up to the task. So let's not settle for being good, let's be extraordinary, and rise together to help our students thrive. Thanks for being part of our Mean Green family, and Go Mean Green.