



## **“Growing UNC Charlotte is Essential to the Future of Our Region”**

**By Philip L. Dubois**

For the 14th year in a row, UNC Charlotte has set a record mark for fall enrollment. Although the final numbers are not in, we expect to enroll more than 25,000 students in our 93 baccalaureate, 61 master’s, and 18 doctoral programs.

This enrollment growth reflects well upon our growing reputation as North Carolina’s urban research university. And, of course, we understand that when the economy suffers and unemployment increases, citizens return to community colleges and universities to secure the additional skills and academic credentials they will need in a competitive job market once economic conditions improve.

But the fundamentals that drive the long-term need for enrollment growth in North Carolina and especially at UNC Charlotte go much deeper. As recently as 2007, the North Carolina Commission on Workforce Development was predicting a significant “talent gap” during the upcoming decade due to projected state population growth and the eventual creation of 700,000 new jobs requiring skills only acquired through post-secondary education. Indeed, said the Commission, to address evolving workforce needs and keep North Carolina attractive to businesses considering relocation, the community colleges would need to prepare approximately 19,000 more people each year than they do presently and the universities would need to produce 15,000 more undergraduate and graduate degree-holders annually.

The brutal impact of the recession upon revenues available to support the budget of state government certainly makes it understandable why some state lawmakers signaled their intention in the last legislative session to curtail the funding of University enrollment growth. One measure introduced would have limited growth on UNC system campuses to one percent per year and prohibited budget adjustments for enrollment increases in the second year of the biennium. Fortunately, House and Senate members working together agreed to fully fund the University’s enrollment and eliminated the proposed enrollment constraints.

Significantly limiting the University’s enrollment growth is problematic as an economic recovery and development strategy. In addition, as a practical matter, enrollment management is more complicated than most would imagine. An increase of only 2% increase in the number of UNC Charlotte undergraduates staying enrolled in school from one year to the next can produce a 1% increase in overall campus enrollment.

We have already seen how this can happen. Given a record enrollment in 2009 and predictions that the fall of 2010 would be accompanied by significant budget reductions, we took specific voluntary steps to reduce the size of our incoming class and slow our overall rate of growth. Freshman admission targets were rolled back



to 2008 levels. Admission standards were raised (and the average high school GPA of our entering freshman class was already 3.6!). Application deadlines for freshmen and transfers were moved up and enforced. Notwithstanding these changes to enrollment procedures, our continuing undergraduate population is up by nearly 700 students this fall, just as it had grown last fall by 600 students compared to the fall of 2008.

UNC Charlotte is not pursuing growth for growth's sake. Early in my tenure as chancellor, a task force chaired by Provost Joan Lorden examined whether the expanding population and future workforce demands of the greater Charlotte region were comparable to what was being predicted for the state as a whole. Dr. Lorden's task force concluded that we should be prepared to serve a headcount student population of 35,000 students by the year 2020 or shortly thereafter. Support from President Erskine Bowles and the Board of Governors and continuing enrollment growth funding from the General Assembly has ensured that the region's only public four-year institution is preparing the graduates needed for long-term economic health. Even in difficult times such as these, funding the growth of higher education is an investment in our economy that guarantees an educated, skilled, and diversified work force, and the fulfillment of the state's constitutional commitment to provide North Carolina's citizens with access to quality, affordable education.

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