

Faculty Senate

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# A tuition hike for quality in education

BY J. BRADLEY WILSON

**DURHAM** – In considering tuition proposals for 2004-05, the UNC Board of Governors is striving to strike a balance that ensures affordable access to our 16 campuses for North Carolina residents and sustains academic excellence. Low tuition without high quality is no bargain.

Tuition decisions are among the hardest facing the governing boards of public universities, and rightfully so. Higher education has never been more important to our economic future, and funding decisions we make now will affect our state's educational progress for years to come.

As chair of the Board of Governors, I have spent considerable time traveling to our campuses and talking with faculty, students, administrators and staff. I have seen and heard compelling evidence of the erosion of quality that is occurring in our university at an unacceptable pace. Based on this experience and after reading hundreds of student anecdotes compiled by the UNC Association of Student Governments, I am convinced that the quality of a UNC education is now at risk. In a sense, this tuition debate is really about whether we are going to permit the erosion of the quality of public higher education in this state.

Over the past three years, university-wide enrollment has grown by more than 20,000 students, to 183,000. That is akin to adding the student body of East Carolina University, along with the faculty and student services needed to support it. Nearly 7,000 additional students are expected to enroll this fall.

## POINT OF VIEW

While the governor and the General Assembly have provided funding for enrollment growth, increased need-based financial aid and other board priorities in recent years — and we are very grateful for that support — these new funds have been largely offset by cuts elsewhere in the university's budget and by required reversions and withholdings. During this time of dramatic growth, the state dollars we have had available to spend per budgeted student have actually dropped by about 8 percent, or \$700 per student, resulting in larger classes, fewer course sections and disruption of students' graduation schedule.

We know that many students and their families have been hard hit by the state's struggling economy. We are all in agreement that tuition should not become a major source of funding public higher ed-

ucation in this state. That is why the Board of Governors called for a one-year freeze on tuition rates last year, even in the face of growing enrollment demand and repeated state budget cuts. The legislature ultimately imposed a 5-percent increase.

According to the latest national statistics, in 2003-04 UNC tuition and fee charges for in-state students actually became more affordable relative to peer institutions across the country. These findings are consistent with a recent study by the State Education Assistance Authority, which concluded that despite rising tuition the university remains affordable for North Carolina residents. The creation and expansion of the UNC Need-Based Aid Program is largely responsible for this development. In approving previous campus-initiated tuition increases, our board has insisted that adequate need-based aid be set aside to offset the impact of higher tuition on needy North Carolina students.

The quality of a university is built on its faculty, and the lack of state funding for salary increases in recent years has placed UNC at a growing competitive disadvantage. The tuition sought by our campuses this year to support faculty salaries would not even bring us to the

average of our peer institutions, and our faculty benefits also lag far behind those offered by our peers.

Clearly, we will be hard pressed to maintain the quality of education that North Carolinians expect and deserve without additional revenues. We agree wholeheartedly with Gov. Mike Easley and others that salary funds and other basic support for UNC should come from the state's General Fund. While we are hopeful that North Carolina may be in a better fiscal position in 2004, there is little hope that the state can meet all our needs in another tight budget year. In fact, within the past two weeks the state budget office has asked the university to provide scenarios of how we would exact permanent cuts to our operating budgets of up to 3 percent, or approximately \$50 million.

One thing is certain. If North Carolina is to rebuild and strengthen its economy, it cannot afford to lessen its historic commitment to affordable access to our 16 campuses, and it cannot afford to let the quality of a UNC education erode further. Low tuition without high quality is no bargain.

*J. Bradley Wilson is chairman of the UNC Board of Governors.*