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Opinion

DAVID GREEN: Failure to fully fund has N.C. universities falling behind

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EDITOR'S NOTE: David Green is a professor in the School of Law at North Carolina Central University and chair off the University of North Carolina System Faculty Assembly.

North Carolina has one of the top public higher education systems in the United States, with 16 outstanding universities as well as an innovative science and mathematics high school. To maintain our competitive edge, the state must pass a budget that includes the priorities of the UNC System. Unfortunately, North Carolina is falling behind other public and private universities in investing in its human capital: faculty and staff.

UNC institutions have lost star faculty to other states, taking their teaching skills, research, and grant funding with them, often due to lack of meaningful salary raises. Experienced professors with years of service are earning lower salaries than new faculty emerging from their doctoral programs. Some of the campuses in the UNC System have reported an increasing number of failed searches in their recruitment efforts due to non-competitive salaries and benefit packages.

North Carolina has competing demands for public resources, and I acknowledge that the UNC System has benefited from relatively generous levels of state funding in other areas. The state, however, must find ways to maintain and enhance our competitive edge with the rest of the country and the world by investing in the human resources necessary to maintain and grow our university system.

State support for public higher education in North Carolina has been called into question since the great recession of 2008. I do not question the General Assembly’s or Gov. Roy Cooper’s commitment to the UNC System. The General Assembly has responded to the limited compensation increases for faculty and staff, with provisions for funding that allows the system to address some of these concerns. Gov. Cooper has raised valid concerns regarding Medicaid expansion, and it is important for that discussion to continue. However, while the state waits on a resolution of the budget, there has been no increase in faculty recruitment and retention, no matches to federal grants, no capital improvements, and, most importantly to the faculty and staff of the UNC System, no salary raises.

Countless businesses in North Carolina are led by graduates of our universities, who as entrepreneurs and community leaders bring jobs and economic growth to this state:

* The UNC System enrolls nearly 225,000 students who will have lifelong impact on the state, nation and the world.
* More than 35% of North Carolina’s public school teachers and administrators have at least one degree from a UNC institution.
* University research provides crucial support for North Carolina companies and even results in many spin-off companies and new jobs through inventions, patent applications, and licenses.

The current state budget under consideration includes many top priorities requested by the UNC System, including:

* Significant increases to the UNC System Faculty Retention and Recruitment fund,
* Full support for N.C. A&T State University’s ascent to doctoral status,
* State matching funds for federal grants at N.C. State University and N.C. A&T,
* Support for UNC-Pembroke’s goal of providing more health care professionals in rural North Carolina,
* Improvements in the physical plant in which the system operates (e.g., campus buildings), funding hundreds of millions in dollars in major renovations to better serve the students and meet the growing educational needs of the state, including $215 million for the Brody School of Medicine at the East Carolina University, and
* $631 million in capital projects and $80 million in repairs and renovations across the UNC System.

The UNC System’s diverse institutions, faculty, and staff make essential contributions to the economic and civic vitality of our state. When the legislature returns on Jan. 14, the UNC Faculty Assembly strongly urges the state leaders to approve a budget which includes the UNC System’s ongoing priorities and salary increases for faculty and staff. All of North Carolina is waiting for this needed legislative action.​​​

