



WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY

**Annual Address of the Provost to the
Faculty and Staff of Wake Forest University
By Michele Gillespie, Provost and Presidential Endowed Chair of
Southern History
March 2025**

Contents	Page
The Wake Forest Community	1
Challenges We Face	2
Making Sense of Our Challenges	3
How Wake Forest Responds to Change	4
Learning from the Past	5
Using Our Values to Emerge Even Stronger	7
Building on Purpose	9

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Normally in my annual address, I highlight the great academic achievements happening across the university and celebrate the excellence and commitment of our students, staff and faculty. This remains my plan today because many wonderful things are happening in and out of the classroom at Wake Forest, around the city and beyond.

But also bear with me as I name some of the challenges higher education and Wake Forest are facing at this especially difficult moment. I will put them in the context of US history and our own institutional history because in the end that's who I am—a historian—and contextualizing is what humanities and social science faculty do. It is also why we will always need these disciplinary lenses in higher ed and the world.

And I will also remind you that we as a community can handle change when we work together to build a strong strategy that reflects our deepest values. That approach has marked our past and, I am confident, will mark our future as we evolve.

The Wake Forest Community

As you know, we have an amazing community at Wake Forest, and we are part of a truly strong and vibrant national higher education community that is the envy of the world. Moreover, Wake Forest plays a valued role in this dynamic higher ed world for a very strong reason. We are recognized for the rigor and quality of our liberal arts-based education; for our intense commitment to student-faculty engagement; for our nimble, entrepreneurial mindset; for our embrace of leadership and character; and for our awesome graduates in the College, the Business School, the Graduate School, the Divinity School, the Law School, the Medical School and the School of Professional Studies. It is no surprise that our graduates achieve excellence in their careers and for humanity as well.

It is also no surprise that you, the faculty, are the ones who make this excellence happen. I want to underscore that what each of you do, day in and day out, is important and amazing. You make Wake Forest strong in this moment and for the future. Never forget that you are brilliant, passionate educators who shape the futures of bright young people in powerful, lifelong ways regardless of your role in this university and of the challenges we face. Remember, people who come together really do move mountains.

Challenges We Face

Let me be clear. This is a time when all of higher ed, including Wake Forest, is confronting some of the biggest challenges we have faced in the last fifty years or so, longer than just about any of us have been here at Wake—even me. But I would also argue that some of these challenges have been with us for quite a while. Higher ed—and Wake Forest—have weathered them before and will do so again.

One big challenge is a public that distrusts higher education deeply. And yet this is nothing new. One of my favorite books, one that I re-read every decade or so, was published in 1963 but has much to say about the present. It is Richard Hofstadter’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. Hofstadter not only explains a 200-year-old social and cultural scorn for the life of the mind in America, but how and why academics have been a force for good in a democratic society. Hofstadter believed that intellectual values, including an appreciation of skepticism and nuance, and a rejection of absolutism and dogma, are crucial to a democracy. Interestingly, his next book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964) built on this concept, arguing that a deep strain of conspiratorial thinking runs through American history.

Another challenge is the new administration’s scrutiny of the long standing, fruitful partnership between the federal government and higher education. This powerful relationship began after World War II and has produced two phenomenal social goods. First it has generated much more opportunity for more people to go to college through Federal funding (from the GI Bill for veterans to PELL grants to make college affordable for all); and second it has spawned groundbreaking university-based research and innovation that has generated millions of jobs, dramatically improved healthcare, delivered phenomenal new technologies and bettered society. Breaking this 80-year-old partnership puts remarkable accomplishments like these at risk.

Then there are the numerous federal directives challenging higher ed’s decades-old commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Beginning with programs that were first established through the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act and then housed under the Education Department, the commitment ensured more and better educational opportunities for students of color. These equity efforts created a more inclusive and welcoming campus environment, extending from admissions to student affairs. They also emphasized equal opportunity and civil rights, focusing on Title IX and disability accommodations, and created new pathways for millions of students. Pushing back against these efforts and their role in ensuring institutional excellence has occurred before. This time we stand to lose even more if current policies are reversed.

As if public distrust and new administration challenges to core values were not challenging enough, college athletics is in the throes of transformation as well. Following a long history of legal challenges to amateurism in college athletics, including 25 years of legal action against the NCAA, Judge Claudia Wilken granted preliminary approval of the NCAA settlement in 2024, resolving three antitrust lawsuits filed by former college athletes. As a result, the Grant House and Sedona Prince vs. NCAA settlement is awarding \$2.8 billion in damages to be funded by the

NCAA over the next 10 years, as well as giving permission for schools to share revenue with athletes beginning the next academic year. This change alone will up-end college athletics as we know it.

And finally, let's look at an internal challenge that no one likes to talk about—faculty and staff burn out. Across higher ed, employees report they are working longer hours since COVID, feeling less supported by academic leadership, and experiencing more rapid turnover in their ranks. They also describe students who need much more of their time, even as these professionals go on to explain that interacting with students remains the brightest spot in their working lives. Burnout in higher ed is not new. Identified first among healthcare professionals in the 1970s, the concept of burnout was soon applied to academe, because even then faculty faced increasing workloads, greater pressure to publish, and more demands to be administrators. Burnout is a persistent and growing problem in our industry.

Making Sense of Our Challenges

So here we are. I have rolled out a lot of very real challenges contextualized but not covered them. These challenges play out at Wake Forest, even though our position is fortunate compared to most institutions. For example, enrollment here is not declining, but in fact, we are building stronger classes each year. We almost always recruit and retain the best and brightest faculty and staff. Our budgets have not been slashed, we have not had layoffs, and we have not altered our programs or curriculum in response to new external threats.

Just as we have used the lens of history to enumerate these threats, we can use the same lens to make sense of them. Another of my favorite books is David Labaree's *A Perfect Mess*, published in 2018. Labaree reminds us that the American system of higher education is unique. Unlike the European university, which was created by the medieval Roman Catholic church and grew strong under the rising nation-state in the early modern period, America's church and state were so draining and unreliable that American higher ed relied on the market to prosper, at least until the 1950s. This mix made American higher ed highly adaptable, better able to act on emerging opportunities, smarter at building political and economic support and more responsive to changing demands compared to other universities around the globe. As a result, by the mid-20th century American higher education had emerged as a unique mix of the populist, the practical and the elite—all in a single complex system.

In many respects, the challenges we face reflect American higher ed's amazing success. It has become so important that our society seeks more and more accountability from us and measures that accountability as it delivers good jobs and an expanding economy. These *are* important contributions. Education changes lives, and strong economies provide more opportunities.

But what universities *also* do, and what makes American higher ed so exemplary, is to provide a wide array of social functions: we are a laboratory for pressing social problems; we are a community for intellectuals to pursue important and interesting questions; we are a repository for the knowledge society needs to address problems that have yet to emerge; we are a world that

helps young people develop into good citizens; we are a culture that nurtures creativity and exploration; and, yes, we are a classroom for training future workers.

Labaree argues that, as an organization, higher ed is messy, opaque and complex, with all kinds of departments, programs and centers that make little sense as formal business structures. But that very “messiness,” makes higher ed strong and resilient and ensures its high social value. Wake Forest, I would argue, is our own *perfect mess*—organizationally inchoate at times, but always guided by our shared values and shaped by incredibly talented people doing good work, day in and day out, meaning that Wake Forest can withstand and respond to the inevitable challenges that come our way.

Given these challenges, and with the knowledge that Wake Forest has been adapting for nearly 200 years, what do we do now to achieve the exciting vision we outlined less than two years ago in the strategic framework? Yes, our environment is tricky, but our strategies balance the short term with the long term. They will make Wake Forest even stronger as we evolve.

How Wake Forest Responds to Change

Let’s begin by looking at changes in grants and other federal funding. Some of the most important federal funding we receive is based in financial aid—especially PELL grants, a critical source of aid for students who demonstrate the greatest economic need. Year after year, Pell grants help recruit a well-balanced, socioeconomically diverse undergraduate class. And yet the government predicts a significant shortfall in PELL dollars in the coming years. In other words, Congress will determine the future of Pell funding, and Wake Forest needs PELL support. The good news—there is no indication now that PELL is under review.

And then there is federal funding for research and scholarship that is critically important to our faculty. At Wake Forest, we have many outstanding scholars in all disciplines and schools who secure federal funds, including from agencies like the NIH, NSF, DOD, USAID and NEH. While we cannot boast the total funding dollars that the Medical School enjoys, our faculty collaborate on many medical school grants. And while our aim is not to receive anything close to the dollars awarded at major R1 universities, our awards have grown steadily over time. Now they are essential for research, including support for grad students and post-docs, cutting-edge equipment, travel and critical experiential learning opportunities for undergrads.

Some of our biggest awards have allowed us to link learning, research and pro humanitate in ways that are uniquely Wake Forest. One example is our USAID-funded project, CINCIA, the Center for Amazonian Scientific Innovation in Peru. Affiliated with the Sabin Center for Environment and Sustainability, the transformational work of CINCIA scientists in forestry, mercury toxicity, fish and water quality and education is heralded around the world. Unfortunately, funding for USAID has been decimated and the CINCIA has been terminated by the government. We hope that other funders, like the U.S World Wildlife Fund and a host of Peruvian government agencies and NGOs, as well as our own crowdsourcing efforts, can resurrect this work. For now, CINCIA is closed, jobs eliminated, and programs ended.

In 2022, the Department of Education awarded partners WSSU, Salem College, WFU and WS-FC Schools a grant of \$4.7 million dollars to educate, train and support 13 teachers in Winston-Salem schools of highest need, epitomizing what pro humanitate is all about. This program has just been terminated as well.

What is our strategy for responding to these changes? First, President Wenthe has organized a university-wide strategy steering committee and charged it to inventory and study the changes; consult with legislators, peer schools and national associations for near- and long-term guidance; advocate for our value and mission; and bring back their findings to guide our next steps.

Second, we are ensuring that our current grants remain compliant with law and working with faculty who submit new grants to ensure their competitiveness. Despite setbacks, our goals are to keep funded research on track and to support scholars as other unexpected changes arise.

Third, we are working to ensure that programs comply with existing law. Most recently, executive orders and the DOE Dear Colleague letter have challenged DEI initiatives. While some have interpreted these directives as bringing an end to all DEI programs, actually they prohibit discrimination based on protected categories.

We have been here before. Recall the SFFA v. Harvard and UNC Supreme Court Ruling in 2023—a ruling that required all college admissions offices to stop considering race in the admissions processes. Our legal office worked closely and successfully with all the admissions offices to bring Wake Forest into compliance.

Learning from the Past

We gain when we use lessons from the past to inform our current efforts to ensure that we comply with new directives. For example, our DEI initiatives are legal if they are open to all. Many have worked hard to ensure that is the case for existing programs, and we are redoubling our efforts to ensure that new programs follow the law. In contrast to other universities, we are not shutting down offices or programs, because we already comply.

Recently, these federal directives have arrived in rapid-fire, vague language, with temporary restraining orders pausing some of them. The strategy steering committee has met frequently to allow us to be coordinated, nimble and responsive in this quickly evolving environment.

The committee has also met with multiple groups to answer questions and provide support, from the University Senate to the College Faculty to the School of Business faculty to the College Chairs and Directors to the Staff Advisory Council. Based on all these consultations, they are creating guidelines to help individuals consider their plans relative to established law.

I know these directives create significant worry. For example, colleagues fear that marginalized identity groups at Wake Forest may experience increased harassment, and that others may be emboldened to engage in such harassment. We have structures and processes, such as our bias

report system, the institutional equity office, and if necessary, the university police, to combat harassment and ease fears. As one example of help, the government affairs office and the strategic steering committee have created online resources that include points of contact, past messages and guidance about what to do if you are contacted by ICE, Homeland Security or other federal agencies.

Yes, Wake Forest has our backs in these new times. If you are harassed or discriminated against, the university has a clear process for investigation and support. If you feel unsafe, your supervisor and campus police stand at the ready. If you worry about students challenging the content you teach, you are protected by academic freedom and your deans and provost. If you have concerns that your research or teaching make you a target in any way, please reach out to your chair, your dean and me for guidance. If you prefer confidential support, reach out to ombudsperson Jill Crainshaw. She routinely helps resolve issues in a safe, private environment.

We recognize that these new concerns make this current moment especially fraught. However, remember that we have a larger scale strategy underway to combat these challenges: 3,865 people completed last year's campus climate survey. Now senior leaders are examining the data in their units to better understand our community's sense of belonging and comfort, and they are setting goals to address the most pressing professional issues we face. Meanwhile Human Resources, with the support of the leadership cabinet, which includes the deans, are prioritizing salary equity and professional development. These actions will lead to more opportunities and advancement, even as the university is studying workload concerns.

These new directives and challenges invite questions about future resources, especially when universities around the country pause hiring, grad student admissions, and budgets. We are not taking these steps. As we look to the future, juggling revenues and expenses are constant challenges. For example, the changing landscape in college athletics means new costs. We can also anticipate needing new resources for research, and new resources for near term and comprehensive space planning, The Grounds, financial aid, competitive salaries, academic initiatives and student programming. Of course, these needs make financial resources an especially hot topic—and one I will not be able to resolve for you here today.

As my colleagues have explained, Wake Forest relies on multiple sources of revenue: endowment income, private and public grants and awards, donor gifts, auxiliary income (such as the Bookstore, Reynolda Village and Graylyn), and tuition revenue. Unlike public institutions, we have no state revenue. So, we remain a heavily tuition-dependent institution. More than endowment returns and other revenue streams, revenue from undergraduate education makes this university run. Therefore, Wake Forest pays close attention to enrollment, even though this past fall, we had the highest number of applicants and enrolled the most selective class ever. Now senior leadership and the Trustees are examining the composition of the current student body and considering the best socio-economic balance for the future. We are also fundraising to increase merit and financial aid.

In addition, we are monitoring financial projections for the next ten years and asking what kinds of margins we need to finance our aspirations for academics, space, athletics and student life, as well as the student body, and linking this work to planning for tuition costs and potential enrollment growth. In the near term, last year's target for the entering student body was 1450 (it came in at 1463). Next year's target is 1500. These numbers help meet the new costs we anticipate and position us favorably relative to other schools that lack our strength and options.

Using Our Values to Emerge Even Stronger

At times like this, it's important to remember our shared values—and ours run deep at Wake Forest. Pro Humanitate is our foundation. We uphold our strong liberal arts education that fosters critical thinking, intellectual curiosity and a broad understanding of the world. We embrace the teacher-scholar ideal, which means that we support the interdependence of exceptional teaching and society-changing research. We value highly student-faculty and student-staff engagement in a supportive, inclusive learning environment. And we believe that these values produce brilliant, passionate, ethical graduates who are dedicated to the pursuit of meaning and purpose across their lives.

As we face headwinds, we put these values front and center every day. As I am sure you know, we are preparing for the 10-year university-wide reaffirmation of accreditation next year. Recently we hosted a SACS vice president to help us prepare. While I do not want to jinx the coming work, the accreditor shared her delight in our learning outcomes, describing them as model work. Every spring, I meet with teams of external reviewers who work with the departments and schools on their program reviews. No matter the entity, these reviewers say again and again that we provide some of the most innovative approaches to pedagogy and experiential learning that they see anywhere in the country.

Meanwhile, the strategic framework continues to guide our vision. Now each school has a strategic framework, and we have delivered strategic framework reports on lifelong learning and on campus life. We are also exploring new academic opportunities in Charlotte. Most importantly, you are invited to the exciting visioning process for the five areas of academic distinction in the strategic framework. This process is in addition to, and not to the exclusion of, Wake Forest's commitment to excellence in teaching and research across the university.

In addition, leadership taskforces are beginning work in two of the five areas of distinction—Environment & Sustainability and Neuroscience & Society. Already this work has revealed that Wake Forest defines Environment & Sustainability and Neuroscience & Society expansively. True to our belief that education is both knowledge and action, the cross-school and cross-disciplinary initiatives that are emerging have the potential to transform teaching and research all over the campus and for our local and global partners. Integrating university-wide efforts by teams of faculty, staff and students across disciplines is essential to success. These teams include natural and basic scientists, business and policy leaders, humanists, artists, engineers,

anthropologists, theologians, historians, ethicists, storytellers and human health experts. Your help will make this vision uniquely Wake Forest—truly innovative, creative and inclusive.

Considering the threats to higher ed, why should we do this kind of aspirational work now? Because times of threat and insecurity can be the most important times to reaffirm our values and aspirations. Challenges becomes clearer; solutions become even more aspirational, innovative and personal. Plus, we must take advantage of opportunities as they arise in the coming years. Three ways to participate in this visioning work are detailed on the strategic framework website. We want and need your voice.

We are also living out our values through our work on Memorialization and Slavery, Race and Memory. You will recall that Wake Forest is committed to memorializing the enslaved individuals who were sold in 1860 to establish the first endowment. Last fall you reviewed the ongoing work on the Campus Memorialization Project, and your feedback has shaped Baskervill's design for the memorial. At the same time, SRMP has shifted its efforts to support more curricular, co-curricular, scholarly and public history engagements. For example, we will send a delegation of faculty and staff to the Universities Studying Slavery conference this month and will bring the Albany Freedom Singers to campus this spring.

And we are living out our values by committing to a university-wide conversation about freedom of expression. In 2023, Wake Forest started a multiphase process to restate this commitment. We believe that true academic excellence and scholarly inquiry thrive when ideas are exchanged freely, rigorously and respectfully. We believe that academic freedom and free expression are grounded in the belief that students grow intellectually by engaging with diverse perspectives, even when those perspectives challenge their own. As a university, we are intentional about fostering both open inquiry and a strong sense of community. Please offer your feedback online. The faculty and staff drafting group will review the feedback and recommend a new statement to President Wenthe and me before it goes to the Trustees for approval.

At this uniquely difficult time in higher ed, what else can you do to underscore our shared values? First, you can continue to do what you are doing with your special expertise, passion and brilliance. Second, you can explain the vital importance of university research, Pell funds and the work of higher ed in general to your non-academic family, friends and communities. So far, we have done a poor job of explaining how society benefits from our 80-year-old partnership with the federal government and from work to create more access. Few understand how we power innovation across America or how we improve lives through treatment, technology and education.

I know that we all wish for a stronger community at Wake Forest, even as we romanticize an ideal that exists more in our memory than reality. What do we mean when we talk about a stronger community? What does it mean to truly be *in community*? Maybe we need to help each other answer those questions.

Maybe it is as simple as attending Senate Faculty and Staff Advisory Council meetings or lectures, performances and other events hosted by our colleagues. Maybe it means that more senior colleagues support and mentor younger colleagues, who can feel confused and vulnerable in these turbulent times. Maybe we all should refer to excellent freedom of expression discussion guide, talk through the prompts with colleagues and students, and share our ideas with the drafting group. I think the easiest way to build community is simply to show up and reach out, connect with new and old colleagues and students alike. It's fun! It's good for the soul!

Three years ago, I was walking behind a student who seemed distressed and miserable. On her cell, she was describing how horrible her Wake Forest experience had been and how she rued the day she decided to come here. When she ended the call, I asked how I could help. She had been talking to her mom. She said that it wasn't all bad here, and we parted company—with me being certain that I had overstepped. At the least, I had moved out of my comfort zone.

But then this student did an amazing thing. She made an appointment to talk. We have continued to talk, and she graduates in May—an accomplished, confident, creative delightful Wake Forester for life. No one would imagine that she ever thought she did not belong here. This is not to say that I made the difference, but to suggest that reaching out is important, even when it seems awkward and forced. I would even suggest that reaching out is *how* one builds a stronger community.

Building on Purpose

As Wake Forest people, we have a powerful sense of purpose and an abiding desire to live out the set of values we call *Pro Humanitate*. For nearly 200 years, this commitment has seen us through good and bad times. And this commitment is real to everyone who comes to our campus, including the students, faculty and staff we recruit; the speakers we host; and the parents, alums, fans, conference attendees and community members who come to our campus. All experience our uniquely relational and outwardly facing learning community. It draws them to Wake Forest.

Regardless of what lies ahead, we have the ingredients to thrive. We live the life of the mind in service to the needs of humanity. If we can truly be in community, we can face new challenges with courage and conviction. This is 2025—nine years away from our bicentennial. By doubling down on our core purposes of teaching and learning, on our core principles of freedom of expression and of diversity and inclusion, and on our core habit of looking out for one another, we can anticipate our 200th anniversary knowing that we send into the world well educated, compassionate leaders of character who will make the differences we most need in the world. Thank you for your commitment to this shared work—even in the toughest of times.