In 2000, Chancellor James Moeser took the helm of a university that was, in many ways, very different from the one he will leave at the end of June.

Eight years ago, the student body was smaller by nearly 3,300. The Carolina Computing Initiative requiring all first-year students to have a laptop was just being ushered in.

Total research revenues stood at about 60 percent of the amount the University attracted last year. Recurring state budget cuts were taking a toll on academic programs, faculty and staff salaries, and overall campus upkeep.

The University was about to embark on its most ambitious fundraising campaign ever. And the campus had not yet begun its extraordinary physical transformation.

Yet, in fundamental ways, Carolina is virtually unchanged. “Here we are, a 215-year-old campus, and there are aspects of this place that are indelible, almost immutable, and one wouldn’t want to change them. And I don’t think we have,” Moeser said in a conversation earlier this month with the Gazette.

“I’m talking about basic values and the nature of the culture, which is truly unique and very deeply felt by our alumni, students, faculty and staff. It’s one of the things that makes people really bond to this University in a special way. I’d like to think we’ve strengthened that culture, but we certainly haven’t changed it.”

During his acceptance speech eight years ago this month, Moeser told the UNC Board of Governors and the University community that he wanted to honor Carolina’s sense of tradition while propelling the University toward its potential. He was attracted here, he said, because of the reputation for academic excellence combined with the University’s “audacity” to aspire to become the finest public university in the country.

Throughout his tenure, Moeser has honored both facets of that commitment.

The current Carolina landscape, like a finely woven fabric, blends respect for the University’s heritage with tangible progress toward that audacious goal to be the leading public university.

A perceptible energy and feeling of momentum pervade the campus, Moeser said. “It is an incredibly vibrant, optimistic, energy-filled place. There’s a sense that nothing can stop us, that we are on a trajectory of great success that’s widely felt across the University,” he said.

“People are being successful in countless areas, and that is combined with a very unselfish commitment to public service and to being for others, not for ourselves. The noble quality to the culture of this place is part of its historic fabric. If we have done anything in the past eight years, it’s been to burnish that long-existing element.”

Whether the vitality comes from accomplishment or breeds it, inarguably the University has made great strides since Moeser arrived in 2000.

He is proud of many things: the groundbreaking Carolina Covenant, measurable progress in faculty recruitment and retention, improvements in the workplace, the far-reaching impact of the University’s most successful fundraising campaign and the preservation of academic freedom, to name a few.

Excerpts of his comments on each of those topics are included below.

What literally makes the chancellor’s face light up, though, is talking about Carolina’s students. His deep affection for them is palpable.

“The students here are really remarkable, and they continue to just amaze me at their initiative and their insight, and the degree to which they care about this place,” he said. “We know they’re smart, but they make this University truly sparkle. It’s such an incredible place to be because the students are so alive and they challenge us all.”

The rest of the University community had the opportunity to witness some of those qualities last month in the wake of Eve Carson’s death.

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2000: Interim Chancellor William McCoy, right, shakes hands with incoming Chancellor James Moeser in South Building as Moeser assumes responsibility for leading the University.

2000: Moeser, left, takes the oath of office from Henry E. Frye, then chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, during his installation as Carolina’s ninth chancellor on University Day. Holding the Bible is his wife, Susan Moeser.

Editor’s note: The rest of the Gazette’s conversation with the chancellor continues on the next three pages.
The state of the campus in 2000

When I arrived, I saw a beautiful old campus that was in desperate need of restoration and rehabilitation—years of deferred maintenance had mounted up. You know, one of the things I noticed when I got here was the amount of peeling paint; it seemed the whole campus was peeling.

I did a tour, and it was clearly a tour of the most atrocious sites on campus because it was when I was being educated as to the needs of the higher education bond issue. So they took me to Venable and they took me to the basement of Hill, where I saw the music library with the steam pipes running through the stacks, waiting for disaster.

By the way, we still have a lot of deferred maintenance, but we have less than we did eight years ago.

The people who help lead the University

I’m really proud of the people we have brought here as well as the people we have kept. Great buildings don’t make a university great; great people do. I actually think my position is about empowering people to be successful, and I’m especially proud of the leadership team in South Building.

I am a musician and I like musical metaphors, so I would say this place is like a big symphony orchestra that is performing at a high level, where everyone, every section is well led and all the players in the sections are playing together very well.

Preservation of academic freedom

At Carolina, we have stood for academic freedom and freedom of speech at critical moments when we were under attack: after 9/11, then when the choice for the first-year reading selection was “Approaching the Qur’án: The Early Revelations” (in 2002) and then when another book called “Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting By in America” was selected the next year.

In the first case, we were charged with treason and treachery for supporting terrorism, and in the second case we were accused of having a political ideology of socialism.

There was quite a bit of absurdity of it all in retrospect, but our country after 9/11 was very much like what we experienced after Pearl Harbor, where there was a sense of terror and fright, and it was also not unlike the McCarthy communist witch hunts.

We were looking for demons, and I think it’s one of our proudest moments that Chapel Hill took a leadership position and we defended our position rightly and rightfully.

We defended not only the right to ask our students to read those books, but the responsibility in a free society to be a place where that kind of discussion can happen.

The Carolina Covenant

The Carolina Covenant has been the model for around 80 other programs of need-based programs for kids from the poverty belt. I’m enormous proud of it.

We’re graduating the first class in May, and their retention rate has been extraordinary, who have done exceptionally well. Many of them would not have attended college here or anywhere without this program. This program really speaks to our values.

Becoming the leading public university

Being the leading public university is about more than rankings or prestige. And leading implies that others are following.

Through programs like the Carolina Covenant, we have 80 other programs of need-based aid while not cannibalizing need-based aid to support merit scholarships.

That isn’t to say that rankings are not important. The thing I love about Arts and Sciences, we have probably 20 programs evenly distributed throughout the nation. We’re graduating the first class in May, and their retention rate has been extraordinary, and in the Lombardi rankings of the top research universities, we are in the top 25 with Michigan, UC Berkeley and UC Los Angeles.

Improving Carolina as a place to work

The Chancellor’s Task Force for a Better Workplace that Tommy Griffin and I co-chaired about three years ago is one of the best things that happened here.

Then, when you look at our professional schools — all at the top of their game, top 5 in many cases — we are a university to contend with.

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The Carolina Covenant

The Carolina Covenant has been the model for around 80 other programs in the United States. It has started a national movement of need-based programs for kids from the poverty belt. I’m enormously proud of that and of the academic success of these students. We’re graduating the first class in May, and their retention rate has been something like 91 percent. These are very good students who have done exceptionally well. Many of them would not have attended college here or anywhere without this program. This program really speaks to our values.

Becoming the leading public university

Being the leading public university is about more than rankings or being No. 1; that’s why I changed the rhetoric. It’s about leading. And leading implies that others are following.

Through programs like the Carolina Covenant, we have 80 other public and private universities that have followed us into this sphere of need-based aid while not cannibalizing need-based aid to support merit scholarships — as important as merit scholarships are.

That isn’t to say that rankings are not important. The thing I love about this University in terms of its quality is that in the College of Arts and Sciences, we have probably 20 programs evenly distributed across the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities and the arts that are top 10 departments, when you look at Ph.D. programs and the quality of faculty. Then, when you look at our professional schools — all at the top of their game, top 5 in many cases — we are a university to contend with, almost in any dimension.

And in the Lombardi rankings of the top research universities, we have consistently been in the top tier where we rank in all nine categories. Consistently, we are listed in the top 25 with Michigan, UCLA and Berkeley.

The Carolina First campaign

Long term, the Carolina First campaign has helped position us to be competitive. If we take our vision of being the leading public university, we know our major competitors in the private sector are really well armed with amazingly deep pockets and big endowments. And we’re still meagerly endowed compared to the major privates.

But we are sufficiently armed when you consider that when combined with what the state does for us, which is the equivalent of something like a $10 billion endowment, the combined state support with the roughly $2 billion that we now have in our endowment, that’s a $12 billion endowment.

We are in a position to be competitive, and that’s a very important thing going forward, especially with the enormous turnover of faculty that’s going to take place, not only on our campus but all across America. This is a huge challenge that all universities will face, and our position in recruiting and retaining faculty is now much stronger.

It’s important to remember that we kicked off the campaign when the state was in a recession and we experienced budget cuts several years in a row. The Carolina First campaign kept the momentum going. It kept us moving forward and gave us buoyancy in what was otherwise a down period.

We’ve had the good fortune of having the state come back for the last two years, so as we finished the campaign, the surge of state support has put us in a very strong position.

I think we are in the strongest position of any university in the country when it comes to combined state-private support.

Improving Carolina as a place to work

The Chancellor’s Task Force for a Better Workplace that Tommy Griffin and I co-chaired about three years ago is one of the best things Griffin and I co-chaired about three years ago is one of the best things that has come out of our campus. One of the top recommendations that came out of that was the Ombuds Office, which is now by acclamation a great model.

The Ombuds Office — things like the scholarship programs that allow staff to take courses of how working together really can make a difference. The staff, faculty and students have.

2003: School of Medicine Dean Jeffrey Houpt, left, watches as University Trustee Tim Burnett, center, and the chancellor cut the ribbon to dedicate the Biomolecular Research Building.

2003: Moeser presents the recommendations of the Employee Survey on Improving the Workplace at Carolina. Survey findings helped inform the work of the Chancellor’s Task Force for a Better Workplace, co-chaired by the chancellor and former Employee Forum Chair Tommy Griffin.

2005: Chapel Hill Mayor Kevin Foy, Susan Moeser and the chancellor work on a Habitat for Humanity House.

2007: Paul Fulton, Moeser, Joan Gillings, Dennis B. Gillings and Charlie Shaffer celebrate surpassing the $2 billion goal in the Carolina First fundraising campaign.


Changes in the student body

The quality of each class continues to get better than the one before. We do have to remind ourselves, though, that because we are so highly selective, this is not necessarily a cross-section of America.

I think we’re fourth in the nation among large schools for students who volunteer for the Peace Corps, and we have incredible numbers of students in Teach for America — to the point that both programs have recruiters here.

And we have increasing numbers of students who graduate with 300 documented hours of public service. At the same time, more and more of our students are studying abroad and engaging in undergraduate research.

We have on this campus an incredibly high percentage of leaders, and I think that’s what we’re really doing. We’re educating the next generation of leaders for this state and for this country. By the way, that’s another way of defining a leading university.

Remembering Moeser’s tenure

I’d like to think this period will be remembered as one where this University really hit its top stride as a great university. I think the built environment is a legacy that speaks for itself — the care we’ve given to architectural quality, to the faithful historic restoration of old buildings and especially the preservation and even improvement in one of the most beautiful landscapes of any collegiate environment in America. That’s critically important.

I’m sure the arts will be cited. What we’ve done is evident in Carolina Performing Arts and now the fact that my own department, music, is getting a building. We have these fabulous Kenan Music Scholars who are building the quality of that program, and our great strength in dramatic art continues.

I always point out, though, that before we did anything for the arts, which is my sandbox, we made huge investments in science. During this period, Chapel Hill really became a major force for science in America.

Most people don’t realize that in materials science and engineering, we are in the top 10 now without an engineering school. That’s a pretty powerful statement. And it’s the result of targeted investments that we did early on — first, in genomics and genetics, then in materials science and nanotechnology, and more recently in nanomedicine and computer science.

Uniting the campus

Contrary to what most people think, there really is not much power invested in the office of chancellor. Other than my ability to appoint and encourage good people and try to get them the resources they need, the real power in this office is what I would describe as moral leadership.

Events like 9/11 and Eve’s death, and the controversy over the book selections called on someone to bring the community together and give voice to its values and culture. There is a certain pastoral dimension to this job.

I thought in the case of the two tragedies that we needed to create a structured way to grieve, but also to come together as a community. And I think in both situations, this place grew.

The students, faculty and staff who were a part of that will never be the same again. Their feelings about this place will never be the same again because they were able to experience something that was bigger than themselves.

The University showed the world its heart.