

UNC System Receives \$3 Million Grant From Belk Foundation

By Administrator
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The John M. Belk Endowment has awarded \$3 million to the University of North Carolina System to advance innovative student success efforts, including improvements in financial aid and math education. The majority of the gift, \$2.25 million, will go towards a two-part project on financial aid including a joint effort to study and recommend improvements to state grant programs that serve UNC and community college students and support for a financial aid innovation fund.

“Our world-class faculty transform the world and our economy through their research, so it’s only appropriate that we apply that same rigor to our own operation,” said UNC System President Margaret Spellings. “The John M. Belk Endowment’s gift will jumpstart our efforts to identify the most effective ways to structure financial aid to get more students to and through our colleges and universities. Financial aid programs are among the most important investments we can make in expanding educational opportunity, so it’s incumbent on us to make sure we are maximizing the return on those investments.”

The study group – led by the UNC System and the North Carolina Community College System and comprised of state public higher education leaders, state and institutional financial aid officers, and national financial aid researchers – will analyze the current design of state grant programs and outreach efforts, draw on national best practices, and issue policy recommendations.

“This important effort will advance the Community College System’s long-standing commitment to higher education access and success,” said North Carolina Community College System President Peter Hans. “We will work together as full partners to ensure our state’s financial aid programs support all students, particularly our non-traditional students who often juggle multiple responsibilities while pursuing their education.”

The second part, a financial aid innovation fund, will provide resources to UNC System institutions to test promising approaches to financial aid and fund faculty from UNC System institutions to conduct rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness. UNC System institutions will apply for funding for evidence-based approaches that can improve student success, like UNC Asheville’s “First to Finish” summer grant program, micro-grant initiatives like UNC Charlotte’s “49er Finish Program,” and incentive-based grants that provide aid to students who accelerate their academic schedule.

“The UNC System is doing cutting-edge work on innovative approaches to financial aid and through the fund’s work, we’ll have rigorous research that establishes which approaches should be expanded and how best to ensure that students from every background can succeed in school,” said John M. Belk Endowment Board Chair MC Belk Pilon. “Financial aid is the best tool we have to give every student a shot at a postsecondary education, and we must do it right.”

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The John M. Belk Endowment's gift also provides nearly \$1 million to implement the recommendations from the UNC System's Math Pathways initiative. The initiative, driven by math faculty and administrators from all 17 UNC institutions, will find ways to encourage active learning in the classroom and to improve enrichment strategies. More broadly, the initiative will focus on course redesign so that gateway courses align with student major and career paths. This redesign will narrow achievement gaps and better prepare graduates with the foundational skills that they need to succeed in college and career.

"When our data show only two-thirds of UNC System students are passing their college algebra courses at several of our institutions, we know there's work to do," said President Spellings. "The John M. Belk Endowment's gift will allow us to implement the recommendations coming from our math faculty and administrators and turn our gateway math courses from stumbling blocks to building blocks."