

UNC System Launches App That Provides Virtual Tour of 17 Campuses

By Administrator

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The University of North Carolina System has unveiled a new app that will allow users to take immersive virtual reality tours of each of the UNC System's 16 universities. This innovative initiative, made possible through the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) NC program, marks the first wide-scale use of virtual reality to promote and facilitate college access. The GEAR UP NC VR app is the first-of-its-kind and the largest VR project for social good to date. While other campuses have begun offering virtual tours, this marks the first time a university system has used the technology across all of its institutions.

GEAR UP NC VR was created with the specific purpose of helping students in rural, low-wealth, and first-generation families engage with the decision-making and application processes other college-bound students face with more secure support systems. The app helps build a college-going culture across the state, encouraging students to aspire to higher education and connecting them with the institution that will help them attain their academic and personal goals.

"Many of us don't fully appreciate that the campus visit is an accessibility issue. Without it, college can become a guessing game or, too often, a distant pipe dream," says UNC System President Margaret Spellings. "This virtual reality technology gives every North Carolinian the opportunity to make more informed choices about where they want to go. Just as importantly, it helps them figure out how they're going to get there."

There is no charge for downloading or using the GEAR UP NC VR app, which is available in the Apple and Google stores. In addition, 21 GEAR UP high schools across the state will receive GEAR UP NC branded cardboard virtual reality headsets and earbuds—enough to ensure that each school can coordinate class-wide "tours." Students will own the cardboard goggles, enabling them and their families to "visit" campuses multiple times to help in making a college decision.

Free universal access to the content and the broad distribution of VR hardware ensure that many North Carolinians who might otherwise lack support, time, or financial means will be able to visit 16 institutions over the course of a single afternoon without disrupting their studies.

Students who access the app will find 16 short virtual reality videos, which highlight the unique features that characterize each institution. Anyone who does not have access to a VR headset will still be able to watch the 360 degree videos on a phone or computer, toggling controls to pan left and right, up and down.

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The app's architecture will also function as an information portal, directing users to institution-specific links, including websites, admissions pages, financial aid information and advising, and social media links.

The app's landing page will feature tiles and short videos providing users with valuable information about what the college experience entails. These videos are tailored to a first-generation college student audience and explain the concept of a degree major, cover the basics of the application process, and broadly introduce users to the perks of campus life.

The undertaking began in January 2017 with a pilot project in collaboration with Missy Julian Fox, director of the UNC-Chapel Hill First Look program. The First Look pilot evolved into the GEAR UP NC app's capacity to accommodate all 16 UNC System campuses as well as the introductory tiles. Since October 2017, the project has involved more than 500 hours of planning and about 350 hours of filming. Editors sifted through 30 hours of raw footage to generate each institution's final cut.

Funding for the project was provided by a national GEAR UP grant issued by the U.S. Department of Education.

"GEAR UP NC faced a challenge of time, distance, and cost moving 21,000 GEAR UP students across the state for college visits. We looked for a technology innovation to address our challenge, and we are very pleased with the app and content," said Principal Investigator Dr. Carol Cutler White. "We are researching the project to determine the impact on student motivation and knowledge of college. In our next stage of development, we intend to incorporate chatbots with our AdmitHub partner to allow students to begin a discussion with campuses that interest them. Eventually we'd like the app to have content from all of North Carolina's community colleges and its private colleges and universities. This expanded scope would provide a comprehensive view of college choice in NC."

To develop the app, GEAR UP NC partnered with Associate Professor Steven King's Emerging Technologies Lab at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Media and Journalism, a leader in virtual reality. "We started with a proven learning framework developed by the First Look program at UNC-Chapel Hill and we expanded it by leveraging these new technologies to enable more students across the state to have this opportunity," said King.

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To create the virtual reality content, GEAR UP NC partnered with the Los Angeles-based storytelling agency SeeBoundless and the Emerging Technologies Lab to shoot and edit hundreds of hours of 360 degree video.

The producers actively enlisted each institution's admissions and communications teams to help author the scripts and choose shooting locations. This cooperative effort ensured that the app is comprehensive, offering a broad overview of the entire UNC System while also amplifying each institution's unique identity.

"We wanted to ensure the campuses had input on the planning, production, and final product so that the videos match the institution's unique contribution to the UNC System," said SeeBoundless founder Steve Johnson. "Campus leaders suggested locations and activities to film and also had input on the script to make sure the video looked and felt authentic to their campus."

The GEAR UP VR app can be downloaded from the itunes store at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/gear-up-vr/id1390999670?mt=8> or from the Google Play store at https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.askmedia.gearup&hl=en_IN

It can also be found in the Apple App store or the Google Play store by searching for GEAR UP VR.

Sample video files can also be downloaded at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/6tfpdpxp86pz57tp/AABP6zr2NeGpDkEGcF0Qt_uPa?dl=0