



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

May 6, 2025

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NC Independent Colleges and Universities

by **Rick Handford**

Dr. A. Hope Williams has served as President of North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) since 1992. NCICU represents the state's 36 private, non-profit colleges and universities, advocating for policies that support students, affordability, and access to higher education.

Dr. Williams is a leading voice in North Carolina's education landscape, collaborating with state and federal leaders—including the Governor's Education Cabinet—and working in partnership with the public university and community college systems. Her advocacy has helped shape policies related to need-based scholarships, teacher education, tax issues, and federal financial aid programs such as Pell Grants.

She also leads initiatives that benefit students directly, such as the NCICU Ethics Bowl and the statewide Undergraduate Research and Creativity Symposium, and is instrumental in securing funding for scholarships and enrichment programs through corporate and foundation partnerships.

Nationally recognized for her leadership, Dr. Williams has held key roles on the boards of major education organizations, including the National Student Clearinghouse and the Council of Independent Colleges. She holds degrees from Duke University, NC State, and UNC-Chapel Hill, and has received multiple honorary doctorates for her service to education.

Her honors include being named Distinguished Woman of North Carolina in

Education, a Woman Extraordinaire, and CEO of the Year by Triangle Business Journal, and appearing on Business North Carolina's Power List.

Dr Williams (hereafter called "Hope") was introduced by **David Erdman**, who he has known since she was a student at Duke, and introduced her to Jim Hunt in 1974, while he was still lieutenant governor. She served in several important positions for him during his first two terms as governor before taking on the job at NCICU. He noted that she interfaces regularly with legislators on both sides of the aisle and says that education is a social, not a political issue.

In preparing for the introduction, David called Lynn Morton, President of William Peace University, who said that all the NCICU Presidents, "... value her perspective and invaluable advice". He then spoke to Duke University President Vincent Price, who said, "Hope is the strongest advocate for independent schools in North Carolina that we could ever wish for. She's been a very effective leader. She makes Duke proud!".

Hope recognized **Luther Moore**, **Benton Bragg** and **Chuck Howard** for their service as Trustees for Wingate College. Helping NC students to attend and graduate from college is a major focus for NCICU, as it provides benefits not only to the students, but also to their families and communities, and to the economic development of North Carolina.

Our Health, Happiness and History presentation by Robert Shaw had featured Salem College, the oldest women's college in the US and the oldest female educational establishment that is still a women's college. Hope added that the young women who founded the school in 1772 had *walked* from Pennsylvania to Salem (if you can imagine what that must have entailed) in order to provide education for young girls.

Twenty-five of the 36 non-profit independent colleges and universities in NC were founded during the 1800s, with Salem and Louisburg in the 1700s and the remaining nine in the 20th century. The colleges and universities (I'll simply use colleges from now on) are deeply involved in healthcare education and training, not only at Wake and Duke but across the state. They work with K-12 schools and community colleges that are the source for many of their students, but also provide training for those who contribute to society but don't attend a 4-year college. NCICU arranges college bus tours for high school counselors to familiarize them with what the independent colleges can provide.

NCICU participates in a UNC-sponsored Symposium of Undergraduate Research, where students in private and public colleges get together to present their research and share ideas. Hope believes that NC may be the only state that does this. NCICU also holds an annual Ethics Bowl, where teams from the various independent schools enter debate contests on vital ethical and social issues. This year's theme was "Ethics in Health and Wellness".

NC has eleven recognized Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), six of which are private. These schools have more HBCU students than any other state, helping to provide more opportunities to fit each student's needs. Overall, the 36 private colleges in NC enroll some 80,000

students from every county in NC and around the world. 60,000 of those students are undergraduates, about half of them from NC. Of the NC students, 50% are Pell-grant eligible.

There is a perception that private colleges are very expensive for students, and while in some cases that is true, it is mostly not. Many private colleges have 90% of their students receiving need-based financial aid. Pell grants provide some 92 million dollars in Federal aid, but the NC Need-based Scholarships and contributions from the colleges themselves provide some 1.3 billion dollars of financial assistance.

NCICU schools provide significant percentages of graduates with law degrees, medical, pharmacy, and nursing degrees, and teaching degrees, although NC still must hire a majority of teachers from outside the state. The private colleges also host numerous adult programs on campus and online to provide educational opportunities for those not able to get degrees when they were younger, or simply those life-long learners looking to expand their knowledge base.

In addition to the 80,000 students, the private colleges employ some 66,000 staff, making them the largest private employer in the state (just ahead of #2 Walmart). They provide \$15.2 billion of economic impact per year in NC. NCICU focuses on working with private and public schools and community colleges at all levels, and cooperates constantly with the state, recognizing that when the educational providers work together, all of them are stronger.

In response to questions, Hope said that three of their schools were severely impacted by hurricane Helene: Lees-McRae, Warren Wilson, and Montreat. All were closed for periods of time, and she related some incredible stories of the difficulties that were overcome to bring them back online.

She noted that tuition grants to private college attendees were granted for a number of years to partially offset the fact that parents of students in private colleges paid taxes to support the public schools, and should get some equitable relief because they did not directly benefit from the public schools for which they paid. These grants were eliminated during the Great Recession, and now all state assistance is need-based.

The number of students attending private NC colleges is declining in part because there are fewer students graduating from high schools in NC; Covid shutdowns added to this problem; and because other states are allowing their major schools to accept out-of-state students at in-state tuition rates, effectively poaching significant numbers of our students. They do this because many graduates of these schools are likely to settle, get jobs, and raise families near their alma maters, which contributes more to economic growth than the tuition discount costs.

In an effort to keep these students in state, letters are going out to some 70,000 graduates with 2.8 GPAs or higher, advising them that they can get a simplified admission process from private and state schools. Additionally, proceeds of sports betting are used to support athletic infrastructure and improvements for state schools, and NCICU is lobbying to get an appropriate share of these

revenues. Additionally, the schools are aggressively pursuing contributions for scholarships and other programs to recruit students into the schools, raising some \$3.7 million this last year.

Thanks to Dr. Williams for all that she does and for her fact-filled, interesting, and enjoyable presentation.

A recording of the meeting can be found here:

With Slides: <https://vimeo.com/1082620847>

Without Slides: <https://vimeo.com/1082640957>

The program begins at 24 minutes and 10 seconds.