



Office of the President

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

September 8, 2020

Dear NAU community,

It is with great admiration and appreciation for the students, faculty, and staff of Northern Arizona University that I share with you the news that I have notified the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) that I do not intend to pursue another extension to my contract. After more than 40 years in higher education, and given the strong foundation in place at NAU and the institution's bright outlook and upward trajectory, I believe that now is the right moment to provide this notice in order to allow the Board sufficient time for a national search for NAU's next president. I look forward to continuing to serve NAU through this transition.

The foundation for this decision can be attributed to my confidence in NAU's leadership team, faculty, and staff. Since my arrival in 2014, we have made tremendous strides in delivering on our mission and strategic goals, growing and evolving in a time of change for higher education, and providing our students with an exceptional educational experience in Flagstaff, statewide, and online. In the last six months, this confidence has been underscored by the remarkable commitment and response by our NAU community to an unprecedented global pandemic. While there is still a long road ahead, our planning and response to the pandemic—keeping our eyes totally focused on our academic mission and strategic priorities while engaging in the hard work necessary to keep us on a firm, sustainable financial footing—fills me with pride.

As I begin planning for my transition, I have an overwhelming feeling of gratitude. First, to have had this opportunity to lead this unique institution located in what is truly a magical part of our country, and second, to have worked with so many incredibly talented individuals and teams that have done so much to change our students' lives every day, while enriching the quality of life in our communities. Beyond our faculty and staff, my gratitude extends to our incredibly dedicated Lumberjack donors and alumni, whose generosity resulted in record-breaking fundraising in fiscal year 2020. I am humbled to have played a role in so many accomplishments that we have achieved together.

I remain dedicated to this university and to the work still before us. My announcement today also provides an opportunity to pause and reflect on how NAU has grown and improved in so many ways during our years together. Below are just a few of the achievements from the last six years that I believe all of you can feel justifiably proud of as members of the Lumberjack community:

- Increasing access for first-generation and underrepresented students. NAU's mission of access was a prime attraction for me to this institution, given my own background as a first-generation, non-traditional student, and I am proud of our gains in this priority area. Today, our first-generation population is 46 percent, up from 28 percent when I came here in 2014. We have been recognized for this growth as a First Forward institution. In addition, we increased student

diversity from 32 percent to 39 percent, closing achievement gaps while growing our overall enrollment by more than 4,000 students.

- **Substantial increases in retention, persistence, and graduation rates among our students.** We have increased student retention from 71.7 percent to 77.5 percent, achieving the metric established by ABOR. This retention rate is NAU's highest ever and a testament to the quality of our academic and student life programming that has helped our students realize their aspirations. Our increased retention played a critical role in increasing our graduation rates. Both four-year (33 percent to 46 percent) and six-year (49 percent to 57 percent) graduation rates are similarly the highest graduation rates on record for NAU.

- **Growing our international presence.** Our international partnerships have opened doors for domestic students at NAU as well as international students from a growing number of countries to come to NAU to study. NAU was recently ranked No. 7 among all U.S. institutions for the number of students engaged in long-term study abroad programs.

- **Creating new, sustainable, diverse, and market-driven programs.** We have grown our graduate school and launched many new degree programs in high-demand fields, built our online programs to meet students where they are and appeal to the growing adult and non-traditional learner segment, and responded to the needs of our state with the launch of new health, education, engineering, and science programs, including an entirely new School of Informatics, Computing, and Cyber Systems.

- **Enhancing our reputation and funding in research.** We have more than doubled our research expenditures, from \$32 million in FY14 to \$65 million in FY20, putting us in the top 200 of research universities, based on National Science Foundation (NSF) rankings. During each year of my tenure, we have set new records for research expenditures and NSF rankings. Our growing reputation for excellence in research has made NAU a magnet for prestigious scholars looking for a supportive environment to continue their careers, and it provides substantial opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students to engage in cutting-edge research that enriches their academic experience and helps propel them toward success in the future.

- **Recognizing our historic commitment to education and educators.** Our roots as a teachers college run deep, and it is something I have taken very much to heart. Most recently, I am particularly proud of the success of the Arizona Teachers Academy, launched by Governor Ducey and spearheaded at NAU by our College of Education. The program has grown to serve more than 900 NAU students last year, providing future teachers a tuition-free education in exchange for their commitment to serve in an Arizona classroom for each year they receive assistance.

- **Engaging constructively with our community.** Our community strength here in Flagstaff and across the state is built through the power of our relationships with many organizations. I want to recognize the leadership of the Greater Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce, NALA, ECONA, Northern Arizona Healthcare, the Museum of Northern Arizona, the Flagstaff Symphony Orchestra, and many others who support NAU students, faculty, and staff through our many partnerships. NAU contributes so much to the cultural and economic vitality of our community and our region, and, likewise, our university benefits tremendously from the support of our community partners and the collaboration with our students, faculty, and staff. Tom and I truly see Flagstaff as our home and have been privileged to be able to call many of our community partners and local leaders personal friends. In addition, NAU has strong relationships in both the public and private sectors that extend beyond Flagstaff. Through our statewide partnerships, which have seen rapid growth in recent years, NAU is able to serve students and communities throughout Arizona.

- **Maintaining and enhancing our financial sustainability while building our infrastructure.** NAU's A bond rating and 143 days cash-on-hand assure a stable outlook for the

institution's future. What is remarkable is that we have been able to maintain this position in the wake of an approximately \$100 million budget shortfall, largely caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, we added and renovated nearly one million square feet of infrastructure that has made this campus a very different-looking—and much better resourced—place to live and learn. I am particularly proud of the investments that serve our diverse student population and enhance the living and learning environment throughout our campus, including the academic classrooms and laboratories, performance and recreation spaces, the expanded IMQ space in the Union, the Honors College, and more. I would add that our financial strength has enabled us to maintain our commitment to the Lumberjack Pledge—our commitment to students that they will pay the same tuition throughout their time at NAU.

- Encouraging a spirit of collaboration across campus. Finally, our work is grounded in the collaborative work we all engage in across campus, which has resulted in a comprehensive and authentic Strategic Plan, the completion of the first-ever Diversity Strategic Plan that underlines our institution-wide commitment to diversity, ongoing sustainability initiatives and planning efforts, and a Strategic Space Utilization Master Plan that will inform the university's future facilities use and planning.

At the end of the day, all of these accomplishments and everything we do together is all about our students—it is their aspirations that animate us and challenge us to bring our best effort every day. I have spotlighted these individual students on many occasions, from Goldwater Scholars to NCAA Division I Champions to our amazing students who come through the TRIO programs. And, this year, even in unusual circumstances, a record number of NAU students have received prestigious national awards and scholarships.

We have a lot of work before us. Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing challenge, and we must remain ever-vigilant to maintain a healthy campus. Looking further into the future, we need to meet the challenges of a dynamically changing higher education environment, and my work through the end of my term will include ensuring we are executing strategies—many of which are already underway—that position NAU to meet these challenges and succeed into the future.

Rest assured that I remain committed to our institution and to you—NAU's students, faculty, and staff. The year ahead will have its challenges, but I look forward to meeting them together with you and to advancing NAU's academic and student-centered mission.
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rita", written in a cursive style.

Rita Hartung Cheng
President