Starting today, we need to develop DFW’s workforce of tomorrow

The future is now for Dallas-Fort Worth. DFW ranked No. 1 in the country for job growth in 2019, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the last decade alone, more than 900,000 jobs have been added to the DFW metro area. Additionally, we rank No. 3 nationally, with 23 Fortune 500 companies based in the region, and local officials are hard at work to recruit even more top companies to relocate to North Texas.

What does this mean for higher education in Dallas-Fort Worth? Certainly it means job opportunities for local graduates. But from a long-term perspective, our universities must also be a catalyst for DFW’s job growth and economic prosperity through innovative curricula and creative partnerships—both in industry, as well as with other learning institutions.

As the only university system based in and exclusively focused on Dallas-Fort Worth, the University of North Texas System is growing strategically to better serve our region. A record 45,000 students are enrolled at our member institutions. With support from the state legislature, we have invested millions in facilities to better serve our students—adding greater research capacity and new technologies that will help us develop the workforce of tomorrow.

Our next major initiative is expanding UNT’s presence in fast-growing Collin County with a new, 100-acre campus in Frisco. Construction in Frisco is set to begin in October, with long-range plans to incorporate tech-driven facilities into curricula designed around five literacies for a change-based world—digital, creative, quantitative, communication and commerce. Embedding these literacies in new, accelerated degree programs will help UNT create workforce graduates with less student debt.

We know that simply growing isn’t enough. For DFW to continue its rise as a global center for commerce and economic opportunity, instances of higher learning like ours need to modernize degree programs and learning to fit the needs of the evolving business community.

Imagine transforming manufacturing technologies to better develop complex 3-D objects to create viable market-based solutions that impact almost every industry—from operating rooms to oil fields—all while producing practically zero waste and cost savings that give local companies an advantage. That’s exactly what UNT’s Center for Agile and Adaptive Additive Manufacturing intends to do with $10 million in funding it was awarded by the 86th Texas Legislature last year.

Our flagship university in Denton is laser-focused on embedding work-based learning into student experiences. For example, UNT’s nationally ranked logistics program requires students to complete an internship, as well as participate in an industry-sponsored research project. This has led our students to opportunities with hundreds of world-class companies, including Alliance Airport, Bell Helicopter, DART, DFW Airport, FedEx Express, Lockheed Martin, PepsiCo, Southwest Airlines, Texas Instruments and more.

UNT is also dedicated to non-traditional students seeking to upgrade their skills. Through innovative partnerships such as Coursera, UNT’s Bachelor of Applied Arts & Sciences degree enables busy working adults to complete their degree in the format of their choice: online, face-to-face or hybrid.

UNT Dallas, the fastest-growing public university in Texas, has made a significant commitment to urban DFW as a federally recognized Minority Serving Institution, with a student body comprised of 70 percent first-generation college students. Working collaboratively with the Dallas Independent School District and Dallas County Community College District, UNTXD is creating career pathways for its students to bolster our workforce in areas of need, such as health care, entrepreneurship and hospitality management and logistics/supply chain—helping to fill jobs in fields where DFW has a shortage of qualified workers.

Similarly, our UNT Health Science Center in Fort Worth—already the top producer of primary care physicians in Texas—is focused on developing workforce to serve regional needs. UNTHSC’s partnership with the Catalyst Health Network advances the university’s approach to modern workforce development. Catalyst, which has established a dynamic team model for delivering high-quality, high-impact preparation and training at the Health Science Center by giving them real-world experience with one of Catalyst’s 500-plus independent primary care providers across 140 clinical locations.

All UNT System institutions are applying this model to the local business community, as we develop a pipeline of qualified workers to fill modern industry needs across DFW. That’s why UNT has forged deep relationships with the City of Frisco, Collin County, local chambers of commerce and many of the area’s most robust businesses, including Toyota, Cinemark, PGA of America, JP Morgan Chase and the Dallas Cowboys. Just last week, UNT and the Cowboys announced a new Master of Business Administration degree program focused on sport and entertainment management that the two organizations will begin offering in the fall.

This is higher education in 2020. Working together with current and potential new partners, we are creating the workforce of tomorrow. The future is now for Dallas-Fort Worth.

Lesa Roe

Named Chancellor in 2017 following 33 years of service and leadership at NASA, Lesa Roe is the first woman to lead the UNT System.