

MEETING NOTES

Research Recognition Luncheon & Keynote Address

Innovation, University Impact, and the Future of Knowledge Translation

Host:	Dr. Sherine Obare, Vice Chancellor for Research, UNC Greensboro
Keynote Speaker:	Dr. Christopher S. Hayter, Georgia Institute of Technology, Carter School of Public Policy
Occasion:	Annual Research Recognition Luncheon — Celebrating Top-Cited Scholars
Recap By:	OSIRD

Executive Summary

This annual research recognition luncheon celebrated UNCG faculty who have been identified as among the most highly cited scholars in their fields, with over forty faculty recognized in the top tiers by Elsevier metrics alone. Vice Chancellor Sherine Obare opened with remarks on UNCG's R1 journey, the current federal funding landscape, and the importance of the scholarship being produced across campus. Dr. Christopher Hayter of Georgia Tech then delivered the keynote address on innovation ecosystems, the evolving role of universities in translating discovery into societal impact, and emerging research on the identity and career trajectories of graduate students and postdocs. The session concluded with audience Q&A, including a discussion of Arizona State University's institutional model and lessons for other institutions.

Opening Remarks: Dr. Sherine Obare

Acknowledging the Current Landscape

Dr. Obare opened by acknowledging the difficulty of the current federal funding environment, noting that faculty across campus have experienced the pain and trauma of having grants rescinded. She shared her own experience of receiving notification that one of her grants had been terminated, describing several days of denial before the reality set in. She emphasized that this personal experience helped her understand what faculty across the institution were going through, and she expressed gratitude for the work faculty continue to do as both researchers and encouragers of their colleagues.

UNCG's R1 Journey

Dr. Obare provided an update on UNCG's progress toward R1 classification. The strategic plan released by the university set a target of seventy million dollars in research expenditures, and the R1 reclassification process is a three-year journey that began in January 2025. In the first year, UNCG exceeded its target by reaching \$77.4 million in research expenditures. The second-year

report was submitted in January 2026 and also exceeded the threshold at approximately \$77 million, though the official figure is awaiting publication. The third-year data submission is due in January 2027 and is tracking positively.

Recognizing Scholarly Impact

Dr. Obare shifted the focus from funding to scholarly impact, noting that the purpose of this event is to celebrate the discovery, knowledge creation, and influence of UNCG's researchers. She noted that over forty UNCG faculty have been recognized as being in the top of their fields by Elsevier, with many in the top one percent. She acknowledged that Elsevier is only one metric and that the university is exploring additional bibliometric libraries to provide more holistic recognition of all scholars. She affirmed that faculty work is being read, cited, and celebrated globally.

Introducing the Keynote

Dr. Obare introduced Dr. Christopher Hayter as a nationally recognized expert in innovation ecosystems whose work examines how universities translate discovery into real outcomes. She noted that she and Dr. Hayter had been collaborating for two to three months on a grant proposal focused on entrepreneurship and innovation at UNCG, and that his published research had served as a primary reference base for that proposal. She framed the keynote as timely because virtually every RFP now emphasizes the translation of research into practice and impact.

Keynote Address: Dr. Christopher Hayter

“Innovation, Identity, and the Evolving Role of Universities in Society”

Background and Journey

Dr. Hayter described a non-traditional academic path that shaped his perspective on universities and innovation. Originally from Moore County, North Carolina, he attended the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, served as an exchange student in the Czech Republic, worked in private equity and the hospitality industry, and then transitioned to Washington, D.C. There, while bartending at night, he began working during the day for Dr. James Miller III, former Federal Trade Commission chairman and budget director under President Reagan. Dr. Miller, an economics professor from Texas A&M, introduced Hayter to economics and the intellectual foundations connecting antitrust theory to entrepreneurship and innovation.

While working at the National Academies and the National Governors Association in D.C., Hayter pursued his Ph.D. at George Washington University at night. He described D.C. as a place where people were consumers of research, and it was at conferences as a Ph.D. student that he met key mentors, including Dr. David Audretsch, a leading scholar of entrepreneurship, and Dr. Al Link, who was a professor in the Department of Economics at UNCG. Dr. Link later became one of Hayter's dissertation advisors, illustrating the deep North Carolina connections in his career.

The Traditional Model of University Impact: Technology Transfer

Dr. Hayter outlined the conventional understanding of how universities generate economic impact. The dominant model has centered on technology transfer: research and development produces discoveries, which are disclosed, patented, licensed to companies, or used to start new companies. This model, often housed in a Technology Transfer Office (TTO), has been the primary lens through which policymakers and legislators evaluate university economic contributions.

Hayter and colleagues, including Dr. Al Link and UNCG graduate student Samantha Bradley, conducted a literature review beginning in 2011 that examined both academic definitions of technology transfer and practitioner perspectives from TTO professionals and research administrators. The finding confirmed that tech transfer was indeed viewed as the primary channel of university economic impact. However, Hayter expressed concern that this narrow framing misses a much broader range of ways universities contribute to their communities and economies.

Limitations of the Linear Model

Since 2013, Dr. Hayter has argued that the technology transfer model is too narrow. The conventional response to underperformance in this model, more R&D funding, more patent disclosures, more entrepreneurship programs, university venture funds, often creates opportunity costs by diverting attention from other forms of impact. He noted several persistent challenges with the traditional approach:

- PI timelines and intellectual property policies often constrain rather than enable commercialization
- The people who actually do the work of commercialization, graduate students and postdocs, are rarely the PIs who receive credit or support for it
- Mentoring within the traditional model is typically oriented toward academic careers, leaving students who want non-academic paths unsupported and often afraid to disclose their preferences
- Institutional infrastructure for supporting diverse career outcomes is largely absent

The Postdoc Crisis and Career Transitions

At Arizona State, Hayter and his colleague Dr. Marla Parker discovered that the vast majority of postdocs, perhaps 93 to 94 percent, do not obtain tenure-track academic positions, despite being recruited with that implicit promise. Their field research, which was published in *Nature*, explored what happens to these individuals. A key finding was that postdocs going through career transitions reported significant uncertainty and personal crisis. Hayter, trained as an economist, initially lacked the conceptual tools to explain these experiences, which led him to a new theoretical direction.

Identity as a Framework for Understanding Impact

In 2019, Hayter began applying psychosocial identity theory to his research on science and innovation policy. Identity, understood as a self-referential response to the questions “Who am I?” and “Who are we?”, offered a powerful lens for understanding both individual career transitions and institutional behavior. He highlighted three dimensions of identity that are particularly relevant:

- Narratives: How we talk about ourselves and our institutions reveals who we are and what we value
- Symbols: What we wear, display, and associate with projects aspects of identity
- Practices: What we do day to day, how we teach, research, and treat people, reflects identity in action

He emphasized the concept of cognitive prototypes: the exemplars or models that define what constitutes legitimate or normative behavior within an institution. When a university identifies its peer institutions or aspirational peers, that choice reveals deep assumptions about identity and purpose. Hayter is currently writing a paper applying this identity framework to graduate students and postdocs involved in commercialization activities.

The Policy Environment: A Frayed Social Contract

Drawing on his experience at the National Governors Association under then-chair Governor Janet Napolitano of Arizona, Hayter described a 2007 compact for postsecondary education that identified a frayed social contract between universities and the public. He outlined several long-term trends that have shaped this dynamic:

- The shift away from applied, locally oriented models like agricultural extension toward a system where federal funding supports open-ended research without intermediaries connecting discoveries to local problems
- Higher education’s low priority in state legislatures relative to K-12 education, prisons, law enforcement, and roads
- The rhetorical claim that “universities are the engines of economic growth,” which Hayter considers misleading, universities are fuel, not engines, and this framing creates unreasonable expectations
- Diminished public perceptions of the value of higher education and science, accelerated by social media and the shift toward a more populist democracy
- The erosion of universities’ monopoly on scientific knowledge, particularly visible during COVID-19

I-Corps and Solution-Oriented Interaction

Hayter discussed the NSF Innovation Corps (I-Corps) program, launched in 2012, as an example of a more promising approach. I-Corps is a coached process of customer discovery in which graduate students and postdocs are encouraged to test whether their technology or idea actually has value in the marketplace, rather than following the linear path from lab to patent to license.

While not a funding program in the traditional sense, I-Corps has demonstrated that participants who persist through the program experience a genuine shift in mindset, they begin to think about the application and relevance of their science differently, which in turn leads to changed behavior and better career outcomes.

He framed the broader insight as the power of solution-oriented interaction: when scientists engage with societal challenges, they begin to think of themselves differently, and external actors, companies, legislators, citizens, begin to view universities and their students differently as well. Polling work currently underway in Georgia is showing early evidence of this effect.

Current Projects and Collaborations

Boise State Postdoc Pilot

Hayter is conducting a pilot program at Boise State University focused specifically on non-academic career pathways for postdocs. Boise State has thirty-two postdocs, and Hayter has spoken with all of them. He noted that some came to Boise State specifically because of contextual opportunities, river restoration, rural education, that position postdocs as intermediaries between the university and local needs.

UNCG-Georgia Tech Collaboration: Quantum and Nano

Dr. Obare and Dr. Hayter are exploring collaboration through NQNI, the National Quantum Initiative. UNCG has shared nanoscale research facilities that Hayter sees as an opportunity to broaden the perspectives of graduate students and postdocs working in those spaces. The goal is to use these facilities not just for science but as a context for students to explore how their work can be applied, and potentially to design intermediary positions (beyond the traditional postdoc label) that bridge research and community application.

Pedagogical Innovation

At Georgia Tech, Hayter teaches the undergraduate capstone course in public policy and is redesigning it around solution-oriented thinking. Rather than training social science students to write legislation, a role filled by very few people, he is pushing them to develop feasible solutions for their communities. He is also interested in creating pedagogical materials that help faculty across disciplines bring solution-oriented approaches into their classrooms, and he is exploring design challenges and hackathon-style formats that bring together policy students with engineers and computer scientists.

DARPA Grand Challenge Research

Hayter is writing up research on the DARPA Grand Challenges, the early-2000s autonomous vehicle competitions in the desert that are widely credited with launching the autonomous vehicle industry. A notable finding from that work: eighteen companies were started by participants, twelve of which are still operating, and several have gone public—many founded by people with no prior robotics or entrepreneurship experience.

Q&A Highlights

Arizona State and Michael Crow's Leadership

An audience member asked about lessons from Arizona State University under President Michael Crow, who is widely regarded as a transformational leader in higher education. Hayter offered a balanced assessment. He noted that Arizona was an unusual environment: the state has a fraction of the higher education funding that North Carolina or Georgia enjoys, and the legislature had limited ASU to a small number of campuses, which led to a strategy of growth rather than proliferation. Crow negotiated flexibility from the legislature on tuition pricing in exchange for commitments to affordability, households below a certain income threshold would have all costs covered, while others would pay more. This segmented pricing model was one concrete policy innovation.

Hayter praised ASU as an exceptional entrepreneurial environment where it is easy to start new initiatives but acknowledged that sustaining them in such a large institution is a significant challenge. He also expressed concern about whether ASU's culture and success are too closely tied to Crow's personal leadership, raising questions about institutional sustainability after his departure. More broadly, he argued that institutions should aspire to be the best version of themselves rather than imitating another school's model, noting that what works at ASU would not necessarily work at Princeton or Boise State.

Student Capital and Interdisciplinary Teams

A comment from the audience highlighted the value of UNCG's students in STEM and other fields as a form of capital for collaborative projects. Hayter agreed and discussed the importance of team-based pedagogy, including the use of peer evaluations (comprising a third of the grade in his courses) to address free-rider problems common in group work.

Key Takeaways

1. UNCG has exceeded its R1 expenditure targets in both Year 1 (\$77.4M) and Year 2 (~\$77M), with Year 3 tracking positively. The reclassification journey is on schedule despite federal funding disruptions.
2. Over forty UNCG faculty have been recognized by Elsevier as among the most highly cited in their fields. The university is exploring additional bibliometric tools for more comprehensive recognition.
3. The traditional technology transfer model is too narrow to capture the full range of university impact. Dr. Hayter's work argues for broader frameworks that include workforce development, community engagement, and identity-level transformation.
4. The vast majority of postdocs (~93–94%) do not obtain tenure-track positions. Programs like I-Corps and new pilot initiatives at Boise State are exploring how to better prepare them for non-academic careers while simultaneously increasing universities' societal impact.

5. Identity theory offers a promising lens for understanding both individual career transitions and institutional behavior. How universities define themselves, their peers, aspirations, and daily practices, shapes what they can achieve.
6. Every RFP increasingly emphasizes translation and impact. Faculty should be thinking about how their work connects to real-world outcomes, not as an afterthought but as a core component of research design.
7. UNCG and Georgia Tech are exploring collaboration around quantum/nano facilities, postdoc career development, and entrepreneurship and innovation, a model that leverages complementary institutional strengths.

Note: Dr. Hayter indicated openness to ongoing collaboration with UNCG. Faculty interested in connecting with him on innovation ecosystems, postdoc career development, or the UNCG-Georgia Tech partnership should contact Dr. Sherine Obare's office in the Division of Research & Engagement.