

Armand Alacbay:

All right. Well, Jon, thank you for joining us. I really appreciate your time here. I'm looking at your resume right now, six terms in the North Carolina House of Representatives, the youngest and longest-serving House Majority Whip in state history. But all that being said, I remember you, our first interaction, you being a party crasher.

Armand Alacbay:

I don't know if you remember the circumstances in which we first met. I think it was a few years ago, right? It was you and Marty Kotis on the UNC board, where just happened to be in town, visiting, and it just happened to be the day of our ACTA's 25th anniversary gala. So what are you doing tonight? Come on over to the Library of Congress.

Armand Alacbay:

We're honoring Gordon Wood with the Philip Merrill Award. Just really glad that you could make it and join us.

Jon Hardister:

Yeah, that was really cool. It was just totally unexpected. Marty Kotis and I, at that time, I believe he was on the Board of Governors at the UNC System. Another Board of Trustees at UNC Chapel Hill now, but it was just this funny thing where we're in D.C. for a conference, and he'd heard about ACTA and said, "Let's just see if they're in town," and we did and dropped by the office, totally unexpected, and y'all were very accommodating and said, "Hey, we've got this big event going on tonight," so we totally crashed a party. It was funny.

Armand Alacbay:

I don't believe in coincidences. I'm really glad that everything came through together. Thinking about your public service, career and education, higher education in general, what made you land on that as your north star of policies?

Jon Hardister:

Honestly, it was unexpected for me. I graduated from Greensboro College with a BA in political science. That was the extent of my higher ed career, so to speak, or my experience in higher ed, but I've always thought that higher education is important. Education in general is critical because you're preparing the workforce to fill the jobs and prepare the children and the students for the future and all that. Basically, what had happened is the chairman of the House, Higher Education Committee retired, and that position was open.

Jon Hardister:

And long story short, his office and mine, and the General Assembly were right next to each other. So I would go talk to him. His name was John Fraley, and just kind of after hours, we'd talk and he'd tell me what was going on in the UNC system, and I'm like, "Wow, there's some cool stuff going on," and I just thought, "Hey, this is important. Maybe this is a space I should learn more about." Then after he retired, I reached out to the speaker of the House and said, "Hey, look, if you want somebody to chair that committee, I'd be glad to do it." And so speaker was kind enough to entrust me with that responsibility, and that's how I got started.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, I mean, that's a huge charge. I mean, North Carolina has some of the most preeminent public universities in the country. What was it like for you kind of getting into this field and just absorbing what it's like to be overseeing higher ed?

Jon Hardister:

You're exactly right. I mean, we have a rich history in higher education. We have 17 constituent institutions, billions of dollars flow through the system. It's just so important that we have a system that works for the faculty and staff, most importantly for the students, and plays a huge role in economic development. It was a lot.

Jon Hardister:

I had to really immerse myself into it and go to Board of Governors meetings, I would go to trustee meetings when I could, and work with our staff, the General Assembly, to make sure I understood the flow of things, the way the budget works, the way the process works. And also, I visited all the campuses across the state, and that took some time. I mean, North Carolina's a pretty big state, so put some miles in the car, but really, we just wanted to promote a UNC System that was cost-effective, that was efficient, that was meeting its charter of providing students with a sound education and also focusing on research and development.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, what surprised you the most when you were doing your road tour?

Jon Hardister:

Yeah. I mean, I think what surprised me is how different all the constituent institutions are. Everybody knows about Chapel Hills, the flagship, so to speak, and then NC State is also kind of a flagship university, but all the rest of them are equally important, and they're all very different. But if you go to Western Carolina and see what's going on there, which is a mountain town versus UNC Wilmington at the coast, and the Marine Science Program they have there, and Elizabeth City State, the Aviation Program, and then UNC Greensboro, we have HBCUs obviously, A&T, they're all also different, which is cool because everybody learned the same way. There's different pathways in higher education.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, and that's really interesting because in two-thirds of the state's public university systems, their governing boards are appointed by the state governor. Now, North Carolina is not like that, right? You have your state system Board of Governors and you have your individual Boards of Trustees. Part of the reason why the gubernatorial system is so prevalent is because it makes it easier to coordinate across the different missions of the various institutions that every college and university has their lane. Despite it not being gubernatorially appointed in North Carolina, y'all are still able to get that sense of this university makes sense for this field or this region.

Armand Alacbay:

What would you attribute that to? Why is it that there's this kind of natural diversity of institutions in North Carolina?

Jon Hardister:

I think it's just natural. I think it just happened because we have a very diverse population. We have been very dynamic in making sure that there's different pathways in the realm of higher education. When I say natural, I think it was intentional. I think it just naturally fit North Carolina and the approach that we have to our culture, to our education system.

Jon Hardister:

We're diverse state, not just in our population, but geographically. We have beaches, we have mountains, we have flatland, and Sandhills and everywhere in between. I think that the lawmakers, years ago, realized that, "If we want to be competitive as a state, economically, we need to have very dynamic and different education programs," and I think that's the reason it played out that way. And I think having the Board of Governors appointed by the General Assembly is a good thing, because legislators are closer to the people. Legislators represent a smaller demographic of people compared to governor, who's statewide.

Jon Hardister:

So having a situation where if you're a citizen, you could reach out to a House member, to a Senate member and say, "Hey, look, I have a concern about the UNC System," rather than go to the governor's office, because pretty tough to get a meeting with a governor in any state usually, but typically, you can track down a House or Senate member if you try hard enough, and probably don't even have to try that hard. But no, I think the system, North Carolina is working well, and General Assembly has been a major supporter of the system. We haven't raised tuition. I believe now in eight years, we have NC Promise program that caps tuition at \$500 a semester and four of the schools, and it's doing well. And the Board of Governors has shifted things more towards practical degrees, practical areas to study, that result in the students having a career.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, and as you know, one thing that ACT has been really kind of outspoken about is not just the vocational needs of graduates, but also that well-balanced liberal arts education that speaks to citizenship. I know there are a lot of pieces of legislation that you've been responsible for, that had great impact on the state of North Carolina, but I do want to point out one initiative, which is the North Carolina REACH Act, which is one that you championed. It would require every student to take a three-credit course in American history or government. Several states have similar models here, and I was just curious why you chose to champion that.

Jon Hardister:

I think because we're all going to benefit if our citizens have a basic fundamental understanding of the founding documents, the Constitution, the Declaration, Emancipation Proclamation, so forth. We added some things to that list. I believe the Federalist Papers, Letters from a Birmingham Jail, Gettysburg Address. We also included the North Carolina constitution. It's not political, it's just making sure that citizens understand the basic tenets and the precepts of how this country was founded, so you can engage in the democratic process, whether you skew left or right or in the middle, just having citizens understand the basics. Sadly, I think there's been a lacking, I think, focus in that area, and that's what this is intended to address.

Armand Alacbay:

So what else beyond REACH and the study of American history would you say are issues that you feel strongest about that merit the attention of lawmakers across the country?

Jon Hardister:

Well, I want to point out that we have had a lot of success in North Carolina as it relates to freedom of speech. We've passed laws that require institutional neutrality, the Calvin Doctrine, Chicago principles requiring the institution themselves, not the employees on their own time, but the actual institution to be neutral, and also to require freedom of speech to be protected on campus so students don't feel afraid to speak out, and faculty and staff, and having that debate on ideas and not shutting the other side down because you don't agree with them. That's something we've been able to put in place in North Carolina. It's worked out really well. We don't want to see speakers get canceled, because maybe you don't like somebody who's on the right politically or on the left politically, whether it's Ben Shapiro or Bernie Sanders.

Jon Hardister:

We want them all to be welcome and to be able to talk. There's also common sense. If somebody's espousing literal violence, that should be shut down and not allowed, but freedom of speech is a precept that this country was founded on, and if anywhere else, it's got to be protected on college campuses, and that's what we've done in North Carolina, and that's something that I'm proud has worked out really well.

Armand Alacbay:

Right. And you mentioned institutional neutrality and the Calvin statement. I think it's really important to really reinforce that. I was just looking at a survey, I think, just came out today or the other day. Really, the vast majority of students don't want their universities to be taking official sides on political or contemporary cultural issue topics.

Armand Alacbay:

That's the whole point of neutrality, is to not have a company line, so to speak, so that everybody should be free to have the freedom of conscience to hold their own opinion. And so I think whether it's led by the legislators or led by the trustees themselves, it's an important part of maintaining academic freedom for students.

Jon Hardister:

And another thing too, that relates to that as well, compelled speech. We dealt with that a couple years ago. We had a legislation that prohibits compelled speech, like if you have a prospective employee, making them sign some sort of documentation to adhere to a set of values that could be construed as political values. That's not good. I mean, you can't hire people based on that type of approach, and we prevented that because there were cases, unfortunately, where that was happening, and you need to hire based on merit and qualification, not adherence to some kind of set of quasi political values.

Armand Alacbay:

And all of that, what you're doing, contributes to restoring the public trust in our universities. And so could you tell me a little bit more about just the feedback you've gotten to some of these initiatives?

Jon Hardister:

Well, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from students, from even faculty and staff. Now, of course, there's going to be some that are discontent, but hey, that's the nature of democracy and, in fact, that is the essence of freedom of speech. Some people will speak out. There've been some protests, but all that has basically subsided at this point in time, and things are working well. I don't believe there have been any complaints on the front of freedom of speech and compelled speech.

Jon Hardister:

I'll just mention, I think those laws are working as intended, but the general assembly have to stay on top of that if there are issues that arise, but right now, seems like things are going well.

Armand Alacbay:

Now, one thing you've also been outspoken about is college affordability. So we have what? I think as a country, a collective \$1.7 trillion in student debt, in particular, what universities can do better as stewards of taxpayer and tuition funds. So what's been your experience, North Carolina? What lessons can other states learn?

Jon Hardister:

Yeah, I think it's efficiency. You have to have a Board of Governors in place that shares your outlook on efficiency. And we've even seen cases where, for example, UNC Greensboro, this has been very public and the news has reported that they've actually cut back on programs and degrees, and they've had to make some tough decisions on their employment structure because there were some programs and overhead that was just not being utilized. There were not enough students enrolled and they had to tighten the belt a little bit, so to speak. And so having a system where trustees, a Board of Governor, members are not afraid to do that, I think that's really important.

Jon Hardister:

Again, you're going to focus on the evolving marketplace, the evolving demand in the job market. You're going to look at, "Where are these students going after they graduate, and what's in need now? What do we need to focus on?" And you have to innovate too. I mean, universities are constantly doing that, but you have to almost look at it as a bottom line, not just throw tax money around.

Jon Hardister:

And that's the approach that we took in the general assembly, and the Board of Governors is doing that too, and I think the trustee boards across the state are doing that as well.

Armand Alacbay:

So this actually raises a really interesting dynamic here. So you've since shifted roles, from the State House to the boardroom. A trustee at Western Carolina, I believe?

Jon Hardister:

Yes.

Armand Alacbay:

So what's been the biggest difference in being in those different roles? You're still a fiduciary, you're still accountable to the public, but just kind of different type of interactions. So how's that been for you?

Jon Hardister:

It's been great. The one difference is obvious. You're looking after one school versus the entire system, so it allows you to focus a little more on the programs and the ins and outs at one university. Rather than looking at all, you're looking at one. So it allows you to focus in a little bit more, get into the weeds on some things at that university, but it is a little bit different in the fact that you don't approve a budget.

Jon Hardister:

You can provide feedback. So we'll have the budget director come into our trustee meetings and give us an update on what the chancellor is recommending for the budget, and sometimes we look at employment issues too, and we have the fiduciary responsibility to provide feedback in that process, but we don't actually approve the budget, whereas in the general Assembly, you literally make the budget. In the general assembly, the schools will come to you and say, "These are the capital projects we want. These are the programs that we would like to have funded." The Board of Governors will issue their recommendation to the general assembly, and if you're on the budget committee, in the House and Senate, you're literally going to write that out and choose which projects to fund and which ones not to fund, and which programs, capital projects to include in that process.

Jon Hardister:

But as a trustee, even though you're not approving a budget, you can provide a lot of constructive feedback. So again, I think it's more focused because it's just one school, so it allows you to get into the weeds a little bit, which is what you need, right?

Armand Alacbay:

Right.

Jon Hardister:

That's what you want at the trustee level. You want somebody who's willing to do that. You have to read your material. When the materials come out, you got to read it, and then you got to ask questions. When the chancellor and the budget director are going through that process, and you hear from the different deans, ask constructive questions. I think that's your responsibility, to help guide them and give them some feedback that's beneficial to the university.

Armand Alacbay:

It sounds like it's really hard to say no as a trustee. I mean, you have fewer levers available to you. How do you balance that with being an effective and active fiduciary, right? You still do have a role to make sure that there's oversight there, but doing that without say the power of the gavel, it's a little bit different.

Jon Hardister:

Yeah, it is different. Again, it really just comes down to being constructive and offering thoughtful feedback, and not just being a rubber stamp. That's not what you're there for. Now, you're there to

benefit the university, but if you're truly benefiting the university, you're going to be constructive, and sometimes you may have to be constructively critical, and you have to ask questions, but the old saying is that iron sharpens iron, so don't be afraid to ask questions and to dig into the details. If you're really doing your job, that will be your approach, and you really just have to focus on student outcomes, like, "What's going to be good for the students here at this university?," because, for example, at Western, you've got thousands of students enrolled.

Jon Hardister:

It's their future. That's why university exists. Now, yes, there's research, there's development. All that's really important. Innovation at the university, that's important, but ultimately, it's the students who enroll that we need to be looking out for.

Jon Hardister:

Like, "What's going to help them go on to have a successful career?" I think that has to be the focus.

Armand Alacbay:

What are the data points that you personally prefer to look at when it comes to student success?

Jon Hardister:

I think job placement and career satisfaction. So, "Are they getting a career that they're satisfied with, and are they being paid well? Do they get a job, where they're being paid basically in line with what their degree would dictate?" I mean, obviously. If you're an educator, you may not make as much money necessarily in primary education versus if you're an engineer. And by the way, Western has a great engineering school.

Jon Hardister:

I have to put a plug out there. But looking at those different cross sections and looking at where your students are going after they graduate, and it's not easy to track that, but we have to try, and we have to reach out to these students and find out, "Where are they going? Where are they working? Are they satisfied with their career?" If you do that, and if it looks like majority of your students are doing well, they're using their degree, or maybe they continued on a higher education pathway to grad school or maybe pursued a doctorate, just being successful in life.

Jon Hardister:

And it's sometimes hard to quantify that, but we have to use our best judgment and use the best data that we can get our hands on. To me, that's what it's all about. If most of your students are graduating and doing well, then that means you're doing your job right.

Armand Alacbay:

When you're serving on a governing board of any college or university, there's kind of this tension between you want to benefit the university and you want to do everything you can to support them, but then also, you need to hold it accountable as a fiduciary. You don't want to be a rubber stamp, but you also want to be constructive in all of your criticisms, and like you said, the asking of questions. How do you strike that balance?

Jon Hardister:

There are a few things come to mind when you ask that question. Number one, as a fiduciary, you don't want to go out publicly and bash your university, right? You don't want to make public statements that are antagonistic towards the university. You want to work internally with the chancellor, with their team, and ask those tough questions, and provide feedback, and be honest about it, be real about it, and ask those questions based on the research you've done on what you're hearing, the presentations that are being given to you. I feel like the balance is not that hard to strike.

Jon Hardister:

I mean, you have to communicate with the chancellor if you have issues, or the chief of staff, or the deans, or the attorney at the school. You just have to engage in that dialogue and not be a cog in the system. I don't think you want to be adversarial, but asking constructive questions is not adversarial. That's how success is built in anything, really. If you have a business, you don't want to just have yes people around you, you want to have people around you that are saying, "Hey, Jon, maybe we could do this different," or, "Do you think maybe there's a way we could tweak this activity so that it's more effective?"

Jon Hardister:

That's the kind of people you want as a trustee, because you don't want to just assume you're doing everything right all the time. Even when things are going well, you have to look 10, 20 years down the road like, "Hey, we're doing great now. Enrollment's growing. Our retention rates look good, our graduation rates look good, but things are changing every day. So where are we going to be in 10, 20 years?"

Jon Hardister:

And then, you can engage members of the general assembly in that conversation. You could call the chair of the House, university's committee. You can reach out to the Board of Governors and talk to them. So yeah, I feel like it's not that hard to balance, and you will advocate for the school as needed, but you also internally can offer constructive feedback that can help the school be successful.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, actually, that was going to be my last question here, the whole 10, 20 year cycle you're talking about. And let me put it this way, if you were a college president, what would be the stuff that would be keeping you up at night right now, given where we are today, 2025?

Jon Hardister:

What would keep me up at night? So I'm going to think a little more specifically about the UNC System because that's where I'm from. I'm from North Carolina. I'm very familiar with what's happening here. It may vary a little bit from state to state, but in North Carolina, I think if you're a university chancellor, you're going to feel pretty good about the support the general assembly is giving.

Jon Hardister:

Again, there's not been an increase in tuition, and I believe this is, it's at least year seven, maybe year eight. I mean, look at inflation, how much it's gone up. So what that means is the North Carolina General Assembly is funding that balance and allowed tuition to remain flat all the way through COVID and



inflation, which is pretty remarkable. The support from general assembly is pretty solid. If I was a chancellor, you asked what would keep me up at night?

Jon Hardister:

I think if anything woke me up at night, it would be just the evolving dynamics of higher education, the evolving dynamics the job market, AI. AI is changing everything. It's remarkable how much AI is changing things, and I would want to make sure that my university's on the cutting edge of all of that. I want to see where AI's going, the job market's going, what areas are going to be in demand so that, not just North Carolina, but United States, can be competitive globally, and so that we're providing the absolute best value for these students so they can have careers that are fulfilling, staying up-to-date on that curve, which is evolving every day. That's what would keep me up a little bit.

Jon Hardister:

I'd want to talk to all the people in know and say, "All right, where are things going? What is this going to look like in five or 10 years?" So you don't want to get behind that curve.

Armand Alacbay:

Well, you're looking at all the right things. I mean, affordability, excellent workforce outcomes, and of course, a free speech environment to boot. So, Jon, just thank you for all you've been doing in public service, and now, in the private sector. A lot for trustees to be thinking about.

Jon Hardister:

Hey, listen, y'all are awesome and active. I just want to say that. Thank you all for what you do. You're a wonderful resource. You'll continue to hear from me.

Jon Hardister:

And I want to say another thing too. Thank y'all for your advocacy on the REACH Act and institutional neutrality. I think we consulted with you all on that when we're passing that law, but also, the School of Civic Life and Leadership at UNC Chapel Hill is doing really well. I'm hearing really good things about that, and hopefully we could duplicate that across the system.

Armand Alacbay:

Having those independent institutes is just so valuable to fostering a vibrant, intellectually diverse environment, and the UNC Skill program is definitely a model for others to follow across the country, and just glad to be a part of that.

Jon Hardister:

Well, I'm excited to have a relationship with you all, and I look forward to the conversations ahead, and we'll keep things going.