Welcome, everyone to our fall 2008 convocation. Each year I look forward to this event for a number of reasons. First, this event offers us an occasion to stop and recognize the accomplishments of our faculty and staff award winners. Being able to acknowledge your efforts at the beginning of the year and then ending the year with the spring convocation where we acknowledge student achievements, allows us to frame the year with a sense of celebration.

I also look forward to hearing the remarks from our distinguished professor. His or her speech often helps focus attention on the values and aspirations that we hold as an institution. I know you are honored to have been selected by your colleagues and I am happy and proud for you. I also enjoy having the chance to see our new faculty and staff members. To all of you, let me welcome you. I’m sure that you will find this the same warm and welcoming place that I have.

This convocation also provides me an occasion to acknowledge our veterans. I am glad to see that so many of you were able to make it today to recognize the accomplishments of our award winners and to meet the newest of your colleagues.

In my most recent annual report to our Board of Trustees, I was able to point to a number of areas where we made progress in advancing the university and its mission over the past year. We did quite well on many of the metrics that we track. In fundraising, we can point to total gifts of over $12 million and $7 million in pledges over the past year. As is quickly apparent from walking the campus, we have also been extremely successful in garnering money for construction of needed campus buildings.

This fall, we moved into the new wing in the Brooks College of Health. By the end of the year, we will be opening the doors to a new College of Education building. Our next academic building, a new biology building, is on the drawing board. We will also be opening the new student union, a $50 million complex that promises to be the new hub for student life. Next fall, the first students will move into the Fountains, our 1,000-bed, new student residence hall with two swimming pools, volleyball courts, a convenience store and a lazy river.

Our campus facilities are growing and the space crunch that we experienced for a number of years is beginning to be solved. I also think the new architecture and the landscaping are making this an ever more attractive campus. But this past year brought more than just buildings.

We began fall 2007 with 32 more faculty than the year before. This allowed us to once again reduce our student-to-faculty ratio. We consider both of these, the increase in faculty and the reduction in student-to-faculty ratio, to be key measures on our progress.

We began fall 2008 with 55 new faculty members. Some of these faculty members were hired on new faculty lines that we had the foresight to set aside in the previous year’s budget and some are replacing long-term faculty who retired last year. These new faculty members have brought with them some very impressive credentials.
Since 2006 our freshman profile also continued to climb. The average SAT scores have gone from 1166 to 1191 this fall. Last year we increased our student enrollment to 16,500 students. In contrast, this fall we intentionally dropped that number to 15,400 students, to match funded enrollment to actual enrollment. Our decision to follow this course of action was not an easy one and there were certainly voices on both sides of the discussion. There were easily several thousand students that we turned away that we would have accepted just two years ago. But the final decision was predicated on a belief that these actions are in the best interest of the students who are currently enrolled, as well as the long-term future of the university.

When Florida’s economy turns around and when budget cuts are restored, we have every intention to continue UNF’s growth. We understand fully, that the community we serve needs us to grow but we do not want that growth to diminish the quality of the education we offer our students. With appropriate funding, we can handle more students while maintaining the hallmark characteristics of this institution, the intimacy that comes from the ability of quality faculty to interact with students personally.

In cutting student enrollment, we have been very deliberate, undertaking measures that are shaped by our commitments to diversity, to growing graduate education and to increasing the freshman profile. This meant that we also had to restrict students transferring from other institutions.

Among the students who walked onto our campus this fall, 40 of these students are funded through the Jacksonville Commitment, a program designed by our colleagues to ensure that local students with financial need can be guaranteed a college education at one of the four local institutions of higher education.

Your colleagues and you have continued to publish high-quality and well received research, advancing disciplines across the board. As you know, these successes, as well as others that I have not mentioned, were accomplished while we were dealing with significant budget challenges, including the biggest budget cut in the state’s history. Our ability to navigate through these cuts was due, in large part, to our budgeting process and to the fact that we anticipated the possibility of some of these cuts. It was also due to your efforts in strategically reducing your own budgets.

While I would greatly prefer we hadn’t had to make the cuts we did, based on the reports coming out of our sister institutions, I think we can take pride in how we handled a bad and ongoing economic downturn. Yet, we all recognize that there were some metrics that we desperately wanted to change but could not because we didn’t have the right resources. The most obvious of these being salary increases for faculty and staff.

Following on the heels of a string of successes in which we were able to lead the state in the percent of raises given, last year the dollars we needed to fund salary increases weren’t there, and it is possible that the dollars won’t be there this year either. We won’t know the answer to this question for several months. But I can assure you that the Board of Trustees and this administration are both committed to making raises one of the two top priorities of the year, with the other being to maintain our focus on providing UNF’s student with a quality education. Both of these commitments require that we use every dollar wisely.
Our continued focus on providing a quality education has several implications for the upcoming year. The first of these relates to the practices we are using in admitting students for 2009-2010. Based on predictions about 2009-2010 funding, we will continue to limit enrollments. In doing this, we will recruit and admit students in a manner consistent with our ideal student profile.

Grade point averages will be used in selecting which AA transfers we will be able to admit. The Jacksonville Commitment will help us in maintaining access. We will be working to increase the percentage of students living on campus.

During this academic year, we will also be wrapping up the work on our SACS reaccreditation. Last week, we sent in our Compliance Certification Report. The next major step in this process is to complete our Community-Based Transformational Learning proposal which will be submitted in December.

The Community-Based Transformational Learning proposal, which SACS calls our quality enhancement plan, is a program that will enrich the learning experiences for all of our students, providing them with opportunities to address community problems in the local region and beyond. It helps our students to develop the skills needed to translate theory into practice and to understand their professional relationships with the communities in which they live and work.

The examples of students who are currently engaged in these types of activities are quite remarkable. The nursing student who went to South Africa to work with infants affected by AIDS; UNF’s Spanish majors who are working with migrant workers helping them learn English; the education majors who are working in some of the city’s most challenging schools; and the biology students who are helping address local environmental concerns. And the list goes on.

Our Community-Based Transformational Learning proposal fulfills the SACS requirement to develop a quality enhancement plan, in a manner that is consistent with our mission. It is not just an exercise; it is a chance to deepen our institution’s community engagement.

From February 10 to February 12, the SACS visiting team will be on our campus, conducting their onsite review. This provides us with an opportunity to showcase who we are as an institution and to tell what I believe is a story of a maturing institution that is coming into its own.

Over the course of the year, we will be engaged in writing a new university strategic plan. The plan we developed in 2004 has served us well and we have been able to track our accomplishments through this plan. But with the adoption of a new mission statement and based on the work our Board has done over the past year, it is once again time for us to begin planning how we will proceed over the next several years.

The plan itself will be organized around the five institutional goals approved by our Board. These goals begin by focusing our attention on the learning environment we create on this campus. The second goal asks us to consider how we recruit and support of our students, faculty and staff and the role that each plays within our campus community. The third and fourth goals speak to our
commitments to research and to community engagement. The fifth and final goal addresses resource issues, a goal that may take on a sense of heightened importance in times like this.

In developing the draft that goes to our Board, it is important that we have wide university involvement. I know the planning committee is organizing its work to solicit this input. Let me encourage you to take every opportunity you can to participate.

If you will look at the yearly budgets we present to the Board, you will see that they track our strategic plan. So input on the plan really does inform how we spend our resources.

As we consider the past and the present, there is no doubt that last year was challenging and the budget crisis in the state is certain to continue throughout this coming year. But even with the challenges of the past year, we made progress in our long and short term goals. Our reputation has continued to improve and I have every reason to believe that we will do the same this year.

Our SACS self-study tells us that we are a strong and vibrant university that can be made even stronger with greater attention to continuous improvement. We also know that with the appropriate planning, we can become a national leader in higher education. We are very likely going to seek the new special Carnegie designation for universities for community engagement, given to only a few dozen institutions.

Based on the actions we take over the next 10 months we will begin the 2009-2010 academic year with an even stronger student body and more of them will be living on campus. The Jacksonville Commitment will also continue to increase opportunities for access.

Our facilities are close to catching up with our needs and we will continue down this path over the next three years. In addition to having sufficient space, our campus is looking better and feeling more collegiate.

In predicting all of this, it doesn't mean that I am blind to the bottom line on the budget. We spend a great deal of time looking at that number, and the impact on what we can and cannot do. But when I look out at the people in this theatre, I see women and men who work hard and do so with good will. I also see individuals who love this university and understand the importance of its mission.

You and the person next to you have proven that you are able and willing to roll up your shirt sleeves to pitch in and get the job done. You have also demonstrated that you can do this with care and respect for the person who is teaching in the classroom next to you or working in the office beside you, as well as for the student who is sitting or standing in front of you.

Last night, as I was reflecting on the comments that I was going to deliver today, my mind turned to stories that my grandparents told of their upbringing. All grew up poor in the early part of the last century in Michigan. My great grandfather on my mother’s side was a house painter in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula, in the city of Zealand. I imagine that the house painting season in that part of the country is pretty short. His son, my grandfather, saw early that the way to get ahead was to go to college. Several miles away in the town of Holland was Hope College. Somehow he scraped
together both the money, and the time away from the assorted odd jobs to go while living at home and helping the family. For a few pennies, he could take a horse drawn trolley from Zealand to Holland; without the pennies, he would walk. He was able to graduate, the first in his rather surprised family to earn a degree.

About this time, the town doctor began lending money to local kids who wanted to go to college, and lent my grandfather money so he could then get his graduate degree at the University of Michigan in architecture, the absolutely only possible way he could go to school. My grandfather was the only one who was able to repay the doctor. Soon after his graduation, securing of a job, and marriage, the Depression hit. My grandmother became pregnant with my mother; an event that did not bring the usual joy for millions of mothers in the year of the Great Crash. Jobs disappeared, but fortunately not my grandfather’s. Family members moved into my grandfather’s house. My mother recalls growing up with aunts and cousins in her home, as well as her grandparents.

A similar thing happened with my dad’s family, family members moving in and out of the house. Dad’s family was farmers, so they always had food to share.

This is probably more than you want to know about my family. But what I recall about the stories of the financial hard times was that they were happy, nonetheless. They made do and became closer than extended families often seem to do today. They did what they had to do. I count myself as one of the luckiest college presidents in the country because I get to work with this university family. Thank you for allowing me to live in this house.