Allow me to begin today’s remarks by congratulating the award winners we will be recognizing this morning. Each of you provides a clear example of what we mean when we talk about the quality of the University of North Florida’s (UNF’s) faculty and staff. Your dedication to this university and your respective professions inspires us all. I also want to take a moment to acknowledge and welcome the newest members of our faculty and staff who are with us this morning. You have joined a wonderful institution. I think you will find that this university will serve as a remarkable place to call home. And finally, allow me to welcome all UNF veterans with us today. Thank you for coming out to congratulate our award winners and thank you for all that you have done and will continue to do to enrich the life of this institution and the lives of our students.

We have much to celebrate and I want that to be our general focus as we begin our 35th year. This will be a year of engagement within the university community, with a focus on crystallizing our mission.

When I ask individuals to describe themselves, typically people have a difficult time: a mix of ego and humility cloud perception. It is, at times, no easier with a university, especially since different groups have so many diverse viewpoints about who we are or who we are not, and where our future should be. But the upcoming year offers a wonderful opportunity to do just that – to make clear who we are and where we are going.

When I talk to faculty, there are two recurring themes or questions: (1) where do you think UNF should be going over the next several years, and (2) what is going on with our budget. Both of these questions are followed by another set: (1) can you explain the continual evolution or revolution, perhaps even civil war, surrounding higher education in the State (what is this struggle among the Board of Governors, the Legislature, and the Governor), and (2) how much autonomy do local boards have.

As most of you are aware, the State of Florida has apparently experienced tax revenue shortfalls, making it impossible to fund what was already a lean budget for 2007-2008. The State is uncertain of the magnitude of these shortfalls, and as a result, Governor Crist reduced state budgets by four percent below the Legislature’s original allocations, with a possibility of a second round of cuts if tax revenues dropped even further. Unfortunately, this downturn in tax revenues is likely to continue into the next fiscal year, with the typical economic turnaround inevitably to follow. This is still a growing state with an economy that is tied to that growth, so the picture is sure to improve.

While not ignoring the impact of these cuts, we can take some comfort in the fact that UNF’s budgeting process has placed us in a better position to respond than some of our sister institutions and other state agencies. A major reason that UNF is in this position is that, with past experience as a guide, we intentionally set aside financial reserves that can be used to correct the stated level of revenue shortfalls. In short, we anticipated and budgeted for a four-percent cut. This being said, we may not be out of the woods if the State asks for more cuts. And, we would certainly prefer to have the four percent additional funding for raises and hiring.
To handle any further requested reductions, I have asked each vice president to independently identify cost-cutting measures that make the most sense within their divisions. In planning for these contingencies, I have also asked that we remain clear about our core mission, avoiding cuts that would impact the most central elements of that mission, teaching and research. To the greatest extent possible, I want us to focus our cuts on practices that are of value, but of lower priority or are not serving us well, without impacting faculty.

Even with this goal in mind, it would be naive to ignore the fact that the current economic climate does cause us some very real and significant problems. Our inability to give raises being one of the most obvious of these, as well as the threat to preserving our student-to-faculty ratios. One of my goals since becoming president has been to increase salaries ahead of our sister institutions, allowing us to be as competitive as possible in hiring, retaining and rewarding faculty and staff. Our data show that we have made significant progress in that direction, unfortunately our current inability to give raises will cut into that progress. But be assured that this does not lessen our commitment to achieve the goal.

While we are facing challenges over the next two years, there are a number of bright spots on the horizon. The news out of Tallahassee is simply not all bleak. I think it is safe to say that the Board of Governors (BOG) is beginning to understand its potential role in helping guide the State University System, and that potential, if it is fulfilled, will help us address some key issues.

One of the actions that the BOG has taken is to join a lawsuit filed by Bob Graham, former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator. If the BOG and Graham prevail, the BOG will be able to use its judgment in setting tuition rates for Florida’s public universities, giving us a much needed increase in revenues.

Up until now, the Legislature assumed that power and, by extension, the Governor has had the ability to veto their decision. In exercising this power, Florida’s undergraduate students benefit from the lowest in-state tuition in the country. This would be a wonderful position to be in, if the Legislature adequately funded higher education, but they do not adequately do that. Instead we have low tuition and under-funding from state tax revenues. Obviously, this is not the foundation on which you build a strong university system. If we are to educate our students and serve as an engine for Florida’s prosperity, we need to increase both sources of revenue, tuition and state support.

The Board of Governors and the Chancellor have each begun to push this message, very clearly and very strongly. And with the authority to set tuition rates and thus, increase our revenues, the BOG will be able to make a part of the message a reality. At the same time that the BOG is seeking ways to address the need for additional revenues, it has also taken a first step in addressing unfunded enrollment growth. In taking this step the BOG has asked universities to place a cap on freshmen enrollments that may continue into next year, unless university funding improves.

The BOG is also beginning to realize that the system needs central control and central planning. At some levels this may sound ominous, but I think if one looks closely, he or she will see that UNF benefits from this approach. I can assure you that we have been, and will be heard when we approach the Board of Governors in ways that are not possible in a university free-for-all, which has
at times been our history. A stronger BOG can assert reason in allocating resources and limit universities from pursuing individual agendas. As we look closer to home, we can see other bright rays on the horizon.

As some of you already know, at UNF we have various colors of money. First, some of our money is recurring, we can count on it from year-to-year. But some of our money is non-recurring, we get it one year but may not get it the next. This latter type has disappearing ink. It is good for the first year but may be worthless the second. We cannot hire someone with these dollars.

Next, our money comes from different sources and money from one source (or one color of money) will be earmarked for particular purposes. Yellow money can be spent on yellow things and red money can be spent on red things. This means, the money we collect for tuition cannot build new parking lots and revenue from parking permits cannot be used to hire faculty. And the grants that fund faculty research have to be used for that, and only that purpose.

While we are experiencing cuts in the funds that can be used to give raises and pay for other recurring expenses, we have been much more fortunate in securing the different colored dollars that are earmarked for new buildings. As a result, over the course of the year, you will see a number of new buildings, a new education building and an addition to the Brooks College of Health, as well as a much needed student union and new student residence halls.

Over the last several years, we have faced a number of obstacles in keeping up with growth. Among these obstacles have been the lack of space to house new faculty hires and the lack of adequate classrooms. We are turning a corner on that. We also understand that we need to build a stronger student-life component if we are to continue UNF’s aggressive transition from a part-time, computer campus to a more traditional university – a destination college. Meeting these goals is imperative in fulfilling the vision and mission for this institution and our new buildings will help us make significant strides in each of these areas.

Using funds from UNF’s Foundation and some other non-recurring, non-academic dollars, we have also entered into negotiations to purchase what is now known as the Auchter Building on Kernan Boulevard, soon to be known as Alumni Hall. This building, along with the former AOL Building, expands our footprint for future growth and will provide us with a new entrance to the UNF campus. This future purchase will also serve as home to UNF’s Division of Institutional Advancement.

As we look at UNF’s progress over the past year and our prospects for the current year, we can point to a number of facts and figures that tell a compelling story of achievement and great potential. Once again, our fall student profile looks stronger than ever before. Our incoming freshmen enter UNF with an average SAT score of 1177 and a 3.6 grade point average. And we are looking at increasing grade point averages for community college transfers entering specific majors. This fall, we also admitted graduate students to UNF’s second and third doctoral degrees, growing our graduate school offerings. This past spring, our Board of Trustees approved increasing the number of graduate degrees we offer by 20 percent, adding the two new doctoral degrees and three master’s degree programs in engineering. Last fall, we began the year with 33 new faculty lines, a
healthy increase that allowed us to stay true to our commitments. And as a result of last year’s budgeting practices and our continued focus on our core mission, we were able to fund an additional 25 lines for this year, despite the budget cuts mentioned earlier. If you look at our new and veteran faculty, you will also find that it is not only a larger faculty, it is a strong faculty.

We can also take pride in the accomplishments of our graduates. There are now more UNF graduates in northeast Florida than alums from any other single university. And in about two years, you will find more UNF graduates in northeast Florida than the University of Florida and Florida State University alums combined. These members of the UNF family are using their professional expertise and leadership skills to foster the civic, cultural and economic development of this region.

We have much of which to be proud. On occasion, it is refreshing and stimulating to bring in an outsider to help with self-assessment, to get a more objective perspective. Over the course of the past few months, UNF’s Board of Trustees has been working with Dr. Terry MacTaggart, former President of the University of Maine and Chancellor of the Maine University System, a scholar with a varied and distinguished academic career including serving as a consultant with the Association of Governing Boards.

As part of his work with our Board of Trustees, Dr. MacTaggart has taken time to assess where the University of North Florida is in its development and where we might expect to go in the future. In his assessment, Dr. MacTaggart finds that we are a strong, wonderful and vibrant institution, and an institution that has the potential to provide national leadership. He applauds us for a number of the actions we have taken over the last few years, including our transformational learning opportunities (TLOs) and the flagship program initiative. He describes our position, using a tennis or golf term, as UNF being in a sweet spot. Dr. MacTaggart also recommends that we take certain actions over the next year or so to build on and maintain our momentum he says he does not see at many institutions. First, he suggests that we crystallize our mission and vision for UNF. In doing this, we must make apparent the importance of both student learning and faculty scholarship, as well as the priority we place on each. While we are not seeking to be a Research I university, we know that research and other forms of scholarship are a core element in building our future. And we need to articulate this well to the media, the community-at-large, and Tallahassee. Dr. MacTaggart also suggested that we pursue the commitments we have already made, without getting side-tracked, and that we ensure congruence between our mission and vision, our preparation for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaccreditation, and our upcoming capital campaign.

During the next several months, Dr. MacTaggart, Dr. Taylor, chair of UNF’s Board of Trustees, and I will be working with the Board of Trustees to accomplish some of these goals. As part of this process, Provost Workman will also ensure that our faculty plays a central and active role in fulfilling this agenda. I am excited about the prospective of this series of conversations. They offer us an opportunity to engage in dialogue that should bring us together with renewed energy and commitment, with both faculty and Board of Trustees input.

As we consider the state of the University and the year ahead of us, it is important that we take to heart what we have learned from a number of different sources, including Dr. MacTaggart’s
assessment. Our past successes are impressive. Few universities can claim such progress in just 35 years, and our future is filled with remarkable potential.

As we celebrate our 35th anniversary, we have enough history behind us to recognize what is only a temporary downturn in the economy, and enough justifiable pride in our past experiences to know we can create a wonderful future.