This is quite a day of celebration for UNF. Today we celebrate UNF’s 37th anniversary, we celebrate the accomplishments of several faculty and staff, and later tonight we celebrate the kickoff of UNF’s capital campaign in which we will be raising $124 million. And the Indo-American society will be on campus celebrating the 130th anniversary of Gandhi’s birth.

I have two things I would like to accomplish. First, I would like to provide an abbreviated summary of our accomplishments over the past year at the same time that I point to some of the things we have to look forward to this year. Then, I want to talk about an initiative we are working on with the state to refocus attention on the importance of higher education in building Florida’s future.

We had some fiscal challenges this past year. With a budget that was reduced from the prior year, which had been reduced from the year before that, in 2008-2009 we had to make cuts and watch our spending, which will have to continue this year. But I would like to celebrate the fact that we are all still employed. As we know from colleagues across the state, this is not a celebration that’s going on at some of our sister institutions.

I think it’s also important to understand that in spite of the fiscal woes we and the country have been facing, UNF did more than just survive the past year. We made significant progress in moving toward our vision and in realizing the mission and goals in our newly evolving strategic plan.

Allow me to offer some illustrations. One of the goals in the plan is to provide the fiscal and physical resources we need to fulfill our mission. This past year has been a banner year when we look at major physical resources. Over the course of the past year, we added 700,000 square feet to our building inventory. This is a 22 percent increase in space over where we started the year. This increase translates into some very happy education and nursing faculty and students. It also means an incredible new student union, which is transforming student and campus life in so many ways. We also have a new residence hall with a lazy river, which was built without any state dollars.

All of this leaves me with a different sense driving onto and walking across campus today. The dollars we have spent on these buildings comes from sources that could only be used for new buildings. Regrettably, they could not have been used for the raises I know each of you would like to have and each of you deserves.

This coming year will be a little quieter on campus. Over the course of the year, we will be working on the design phase of the new biology building and trying to renovate some of the current spaces that we vacated as we opened our newest buildings and moved other people to UNF Hall. We will also be working on our next five-year master plan that shows where we will be going in the next phase of our building program. I encourage each of you to take advantage of the various opportunities to participate in this process. We need your ideas.

Each of our new buildings has been constructed to meet the toughest of environmental and sustainability standards and we are going to continue down that path. Capital projects are not our
only successes in securing needed resources; we have also had significant success in long-term fiscal planning. Over the course of the past year, I had an opportunity to serve as President in Residence for the Board of Governors. This allowed me to work even more directly with the Legislature and the Governor on higher education issues. In this work, I was able to help move through a budget for the state universities that included tuition differential for all 11 institutions, not just the big five. This budget also decoupled tuition from Bright Futures.

What this means for UNF is our cuts were by far less than if we had not received the tuition differential, and as we move forward, we have much greater control over our tuition rates. We can move from last place in the nation for funding to a midpoint over the next several years.

Those of you who study higher education finance know what a major accomplishment this is for the university and the state system. Hopefully, we will be announcing other major accomplishments over the course of the year.

Last year was also a good year in private funding. While philanthropy has been down across the country, UNF can celebrate a successful year in fund raising. Exceeding our goal for the year, in 2008-2009, we raised $13 million in new support for the university and we are kicking off the Power of Transformation, a $125 million capital campaign, this evening. If we are going to transform our students’ lives and, in turn, transform this community, we need community support and community leaders understand the importance of their involvement.

Our accomplishments over the past year are not limited to new buildings and new funding sources; we have also made significant strides in moving our core mission forward. As the SACS visitation team noted in their report, UNF has an institutional commitment to quality and integrity – a commitment that has allowed us to put together the strategies needed to enhance student learning and development.

The work we have done has certainly paid off in the quality of the students we graduate and it is allowing UNF to make progress in achieving a goal we have set for ourselves in our vision statement: becoming a preeminent public institution. For example, this past year, the School of Nursing was recognized by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing as a recipient of the prestigious Innovations in Professional Nursing Education Award and the College of Education received the Exemplary Professional Development School Achievement Award from the National Association of Professional Development Schools. Both of these awards tell us we are on our way to achieving this preeminence.

These recognitions also highlight our faculty’s hard work and give testimony to the quality programs we are offering our students. We are on the right track and we need to keep our focus on quality, as well as on the numbers we are using to measure that quality. To ensure that we can sustain this focus on quality, we have begun a number of faculty searches to fill many of the vacant positions we left empty to balance the budget.

In keeping with our focus on quality, we will also be seeking endorsement from the Carnegie Foundation, recognizing our commitment to community engagement. This designation will
document our ongoing efforts to engage our students in community-based transformational learning and all of our other various efforts to serve as a cultural, economic and educational resource for Northeast Florida. It will also align us with some rather prestigious colleges and universities such as Duke, UCLA and Georgetown.

Our Community-Based Transformational Learning program, which kicks off this year, expands on and enhances our commitments to our students, our community and transformational learning, three hallmarks of this university.

As we move forward, we will also be increasing our emphasis on measuring success through a set of key benchmark metrics. Two that we have already begun to examine are our retention and graduation rates. There are a number of reasons we should be focusing on these. They tell us how well we are meeting individual student needs. They also tell the taxpayer and parents who are paying the bills how well we are investing their money.

In addition, we know that our community’s economic future rests in large part on having greater numbers of college-educated citizens and this is one key measure in how much we are doing to help fill this need. Also, there is ongoing discussion in Washington to add a little feature to the cost calculator that potential students use when they are applying for financial aid. If this proposed feature is added, when a student types in the code for a particular university, the six-year graduation rate will pop up on the screen.

When we talk about increasing graduation rates, we are not talking about lowering standards on tests or other assignments. We are talking about engendering greater student engagement and attachment, offering the support services that can make a difference between failure and success and making sure we admit students who have capacity to complete the curriculum, albeit on occasions with some help.

One of the metrics we have often pointed to over the past few years is the SAT score for our entering freshmen. We begin this year with a freshman class that has an average SAT score of 1200. This score has climbed every year for the past five years.

As I reflect on the past year, I am certainly not blind to the fiscal problems. But despite these problems, we did more than survive, in many areas we actually thrived. We have also been busy laying a foundation for an even better future.

During the past year, as I worked with the Board of Governors’ leadership and with the Legislature and the Governor, I have seen a change in attitude about higher education. The economic crisis and the changes in population growth have led to an acute awareness that we need to change Florida’s economy if the state is to thrive. Over the last several months we have been working hard to carry the message that if we are to regain economic prosperity, we cannot rely on agriculture, tourism and population growth. We must move to a knowledge-based economy.

This message has been resonating with the political and business leaders. Along with this message, we have offered a plan for a New Florida that invests heavily in higher education; calls for building
research capacity at all of our public universities to ensure economic growth across the state, not just in certain pockets; and that supports increased degree production to help develop an educated citizenry, which is needed to sustain this knowledge-based economy.

Having spent untold hours helping to develop and articulate this plan, I can tell you that people are beginning to understand how important we, the State University System is to Florida’s future. We are not just a nice add on, we are a foundation on which to build the New Florida. I hope and suspect that you will be hearing more and more about this plan over the next several months.

I know this past year has been a tough year for many of us but I have to tell you how proud I am of each of you. We are a better institution today than we were a year ago because of your efforts and as we come out of these challenging times, I know we are better positioned to capitalize on the future.

Today, I want us to celebrate, our collective and individual successes, the important work we are engaged in, the fact that we can work together with each other, the opportunities we will have as we move forward, and the fact that we are helping to transform the lives of some amazing students.