Fall convocation marks the beginning of a new academic year and it serves as a day of recognition and celebration. We set this day aside to welcome faculty and staff members who are new to the University of North Florida. It is also a day when we stop to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to the university through their teaching, their service, their scholarship and their commitment to international studies. Additionally, this is the first time we are recognizing individual and departmental commitments to diversity.

Provost Workman and I will try to provide some context and insights on where we have been and where we are going as an institution. And most importantly, we have a chance to hear from our distinguished professor of the year. These men and women who have been selected by their colleagues, such as Tom Pekarek, Jay Coleman and Louise Freshman Brown, inspire us through their own stories and by pointing to the individuals who inspired them. They challenge us to become a better institution, such as David Fenner’s pointed comments on diversity and Pam Chally’s attention to the teamwork and collaboration that it will take for us to reach greatness. It is a day to celebrate who we are and reflect on where we are going.

Four days from today, we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of UNF opening its doors, a day when just over 2,000 juniors walked onto this campus to meet the 117 founding faculty members, some of whom are with us today. At the end of the following year, 35 of these students became UNF’s first graduates. Since that first year, we have experienced steady growth in enrollments and, more often than not, increased funding. That is until 2008 when we put the brakes on enrollment, as a result of the ongoing cuts in state budgets.

This fall, 16,500 undergraduate, masters’ and doctoral students walked onto our campus to study with 564 faculty members. And, after 40 years, we can name over 74,000 women and men who have walked across the UNF stage to receive over 75,000 degrees.

The freshmen who entered this fall, once again, raised the profile of our student body with an average score of 1212 on the verbal and quantitative sections of the SAT and a 3.9 high school GPA, making us one of the most competitive universities in this state.

Forty years ago, the men and women on this campus each held a narrative of what this institution was to become. Not surprisingly, these narratives varied but there were common themes included in most of them, themes that continue to run through the descriptions we apply to ourselves today: a university dedicated to employing the best instructional practices; an institution where people treat each other with respect and dignity and where diversity is fostered; an institution that respects the natural ecology of the campus and one that is responsive to regional needs, and; a university where the individual student’s journey is at the center of our mission. These were the foundations of UNF in October 1972 and they remain our foundations going into October 2012.

While the foundations are the same, much has changed and much will continue to change as we move forward. That is inevitable with the passage of time. When handled well, change fuels growth.
and maturation, as well as renewal. Change can also keep us on a path to success, and I dare say to greatness.

In 1972, a UNF faculty member, who was out in the community and made reference to teaching at the university, might well have been asked what subject matter she taught at Jacksonville University. As the new kid on the block, UNF was struggling to be recognized even locally. In 2012, we have quite a different story. When national rating services speak of the best value colleges, schools that provide a quality education and an affordable price, you can be sure that UNF will be among the best in the U.S. This is true for the Princeton Review, Kiplinger’s or Forbes.

When national rating services are talking about the strongest public regional universities, once again the University of North Florida is on the list. When organizations from across the country are identifying universities that are engaged with their local communities, you will find the name of the University of North Florida. Whether the list is being put together by the Carnegie Foundation or the White House, or is a rating of military friendly campuses, the University of North Florida will be included.

UNF was in the news a total of 11,308 times last year, which was more than 30 times a day, every day. Whether a newspaper is quoting one of our professors or a TV station is covering the work of one of our student organizations, Jacksonville knows we are here.

After our amazing and well-deserved showing during the CNN Republican candidate debates, lots of other people from across the United States, including Wolf Blitzer, extolled many of our virtues any number of times on national television. But we do need to reinforce the facts about how well-ranked we are nationally.

When we opened our doors, there were no student residence halls on campus. The buildings here made us seem like a 1960’s community college surrounded by a shopping mall parking lot. In his 1998 Distinguished Professor lecture, David Courtwright described the buildings on this campus by saying “there are no architecturally distinguished buildings on this campus[.] Most of our buildings—if you will pardon a triple oxymoron—are polygonal utilitarian clinkers, the scale of their facades ruined by the useful but ugly concrete walkways.” David challenged us to change that reality. I think our newly opened Biology Building and Student Wellness Complex, as well as our architecture award-winning Student Union, provide a different picture than the one David painted in 1998 and I hope he would agree.

In changing the architecture and aesthetics on our campus, we have also paid close attention to our natural surroundings, which make us the most beautiful campus in the Florida system. Since the Social Sciences Building, all of our construction has met LEED environmental standards, with three of them hitting the gold standard. This University of North Florida has become the most beautiful campus in the state and among the most beautiful in the country and we can take great pride in that.
Forty years ago, the best way to serve the northeast Florida region was as a commuter campus; thus, we offered upper-division courses to juniors and seniors who were place-bound. Then we quickly added some master's degrees for students from the region.

Over time, changes occurred and we added freshmen and sophomores, a limited number of doctoral students and residence halls. But for all practical purposes, we remained a commuter campus.

In the same 1998 speech in which Dr. Courtwright challenged us to do something about our architecture, he also noted that, “The life-of-the-mind-after-dark at UNF is sporadic, uncoordinated, and generally under-advertised. It also suffers... from the fact that so many students are commuters. For them a return trip in the evening is on the same level as a visit to the periodontist.”

This fall term, with over 3,000 students living in our residence halls and the introduction of mandatory housing for first-year students, we are moving away from the commuter campus image. This move to a full-time, more residential campus is motivated by a number of different values, not the least of which is our desire to improve the rate of return on our students’ and Florida taxpayers’ investments, and to provide our students with enhanced educational opportunities.

Commuter campuses are notorious for having lower graduation rates when compared to campuses where students live on campus and in student apartment complexes close to campus. Students who live on campus in their first year and in close-by university-centric apartments, later in their academic careers, become involved in campus life. They become connected to their university and they are more likely to graduate and graduate on time. They also tend to do better after graduation and rate their college experience as more beneficial. For these students, a trip back to campus after dark isn’t like the trip to the periodontist that Courwright described. Instead, it is going to a movie, meeting classmates at the library, and on occasion, attending a concert or a great lecture.

Our decision to move toward mandatory housing is heralded by some as a bold move on UNF’s part and by others it’s seen as a risky experiment. For me, it’s an important step in changing our culture. We don’t have to be a research university to be a great institution but we are unlikely to get there as a computer campus. Our city needs, and our students deserve to graduate from a great institution and that means a university where our students’ lives are transformed.

There are a number of other things we are paying attention to on our way to becoming that great institution called for in many of our distinguished professors’ speeches; our curriculum, our instructional delivery systems, strengthening campus life, the size of our student body, our diversity and others. We are increasing our use of distance learning, but doing so guided by our own principles and goals. If you want to find the group of universities with the lowest graduation rates, just take a look at the numbers being reported by for-profit, distance learning universities. We will not emulate their practices.

We are increasing campus life activities and facilities, including a new dining hall that will have a 4th floor faculty lounge, a place we hope to foster some of the values that Pam Chally spoke about in her 2008 Distinguished Professor lecture. We are giving out our first awards for contributing to diversity.
on campus at this convocation, a program that was, in part, spurred on by David Fenner’s 2010 Distinguished Professor address at this convocation.

Underlying these, and all of our other efforts, is the need to pay attention to funding, which is a theme that is not uncommon in distinguished professor lectures. While I have been referencing back to prior distinguished professor lectures, the particular convocation speech I wish I could go back to on this matter is my 2006 State of the University address. It was in that speech that I was able to talk about closing the gap between the number of students who walked onto our campus and the number of students Tallahassee was funding. We had finally caught up. It was also the time I could talk about $30 million in PECO funding.

Since that convocation, much of the news we have had to deliver on funding has been bad, with the worst of it being the lack of raises, except for a 3 percent increase in 2010, and that raise that was followed by a state mandate that we each pay 3 percent of our salaries into our individual retirement accounts.

At one point, our undergraduate students paid for 25 percent of the cost of their education and today the student’s responsibility has grown to just under 50 percent. That change in the state-to student-funding ratio is the result of fewer state dollars and 13 to 15 percent annual tuition increases over the past few years. Florida still offers among the lowest undergraduate tuition in the country and that’s good for keeping bright students in-state. It also provides among the lowest funding-per-student in the nation and that’s not so good for educating these bright students. We haven’t been without some good news though, we have been fortunate enough to avoid layoffs unlike our sister institutions.

Even with the tuition increases, our students have agreed to accept more of the responsibility with additional technology and distance learning fees. Our students have also been willing to invest additional funds in building student life facilities and supporting student life activities.

Our community has also been generous in their support during our capital campaign. Even in these difficult economic times, we believe that when the campaign closes we will come in with a number that will put a smile on everyone’s face.

Ultimately, we need a healthy economy to fund an institution that helps to grow that same economy, and the news out of Tallahassee is promising for next year. That doesn’t mean we’re in the money though, things could change over the next several months. It is our hope that after a tight 2012-2013 year, we will see relief in 2013-2014 – at least this is what the Budget Estimating Conference indicates.

Under the plan we’re proposing, universities would get a boost in funding without having to rely on another 15 percent tuition increase. We are working hard with our students to build the case for this plan and you will see this in a student-initiated lobbying effort called AIM HIGHER. This effort challenges the Governor, the legislature and the institutions to AIM HIGHER in funding Higher Education.
We have 40 years of history, the remarks from 34 distinguished professors, and the success of over 74,000 women and men who have graduated from UNF by which we can judge ourselves. Perfect we are not but we have done a darn good job of addressing the original needs of our community. And we are poised to do an even more remarkable job addressing the new and emerging needs as we move into our 41st year and beyond.

I am so glad that I got to join this, the University of North Florida community and, no, I am not planning on moving to Gainesville. There are too many good people doing important work right here and I am hoping to be a part of that work for several years to come.