Fall convocation serves as a marker for the beginning of a new academic year, as well as a day of recognition and celebration for faculty and staff. We set this day aside to welcome faculty and staff who are new to the University of North Florida. We also stop to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to the university through their teaching, service, scholarship, commitment to international studies, and their commitment to diversity. We will also hear from our Distinguished Professor of the Year, Dr. Judith Rodriquez.

In my brief remarks on these occasions, I try to provide some context and insights on where we have been and where we are going, as an institution. In thinking about setting context, I wondered how to characterize a year that began with some of the largest cuts in state funding that the university has experienced. Then, in the middle of the year, we met and exceeded our goal for the largest capital campaign in the history of northeast Florida. And, at the end of the year, we were able to build a budget for FY 2014 that included a significant infusion of state support that will enable us to fill a portion of the financial hole that grew deeper over each of the last six years. But, we are able to combine state- and university-funded raises and fill a part of the hole that occurred in your personal budgets over those six years.

I am particularly glad that the state’s raise includes a $400 kicker for the lowest paid of our staff. While we were all hit by the economic downturn, these members of the UNF family felt it the hardest. I think when we average out the raises we’ll be giving out across the board, we should be around 3 percent – 2 percent of which is coming from the university. I wish it was larger, but the fact that we can make an announcement of a raise, following a period in which we were the only public university to not use layoffs to balance our budget, makes me feel good about how we have managed our funds. It also makes me feel like I work with the best team in the State University System, because throughout all of this, we didn’t cut our students short during the whole, seemingly never-ending process.

I would like to point out that we have pay raises, we have students who are out pacing their peers in employment and earnings at the point of graduation and the students who walked on the campus this fall are the brightest freshman class ever. The sun is shining on UNF and I appreciate the quality of this team, which really is truly remarkable.

I would like to speak about some of the other accomplishments we had this past year and some of the opportunities we have coming up this year. One of the many things we can brag about here at UNF is the fact that in doing all of this, we are adding value to our students’ lives. According to College Data Base, over the past several years, those students who graduated from UNF were among the most likely in Florida to be employed after graduation and they were among the highest paid as they started out their careers. This advantage continued into their mid-careers and, in fact, UNF was distinguished as a Top Florida College for Return on Investment. But not only are UNF students getting employed, they are also making major leaps in their knowledge and skills while they are on our campus.
According to national test scores on the Educational Testing Services' Proficiency Profile, UNF freshmen are coming into college ahead of their national peers in the areas of critical thinking, writing and mathematics, and as seniors, UNF students are scoring higher than their peers in critical thinking and mathematics. They have also made some of the most significant gains in these skill areas. This means we are bringing in bright students and they are learning more while on our campus than they might have at most universities across the country. We are adding value to our students’ knowledge in the areas recognized as critical by most employers. The UNF student didn’t just enter with a strong academic record; they grew even stronger while they were with us. Mom, Dad and our students were, and are making a good investment.

With 58 percent of these graduates staying right here on the First Coast, contributing to the economic and cultural growth of the region, and another 20 percent living and working in other parts of Florida, the Florida taxpayer is also making a good investment. These are numbers to be proud of, but we face a major challenge that we have faced for several years now. How do we move from being a commuter campus to becoming a university that is built on a Culture of Completion? How do we move away from an institution where most students just drive onto campus, take a class or two and drive off campus on their way to their hectic “real lives?” How do we move toward a school where most students come to school, knowing that most of their peers sitting next to them will be the same peers who will walk across the stage with them when they get their diplomas in four years? Their “real lives” become the lives of college students, immersed in the life of the university.

As is true across the country at most universities, too many UNF students who walk onto campus are leaving our campus without a degree in hand. In fact more than 50 percent of the students who start their college careers at UNF, leave without a UNF degree. I know that doesn't sound good and it’s not, but if you put it in perspective, we are graduating a higher percentage than five of our SUS peers. That sounds better, but it’s hardly where we want to be. While we want more students to carry a UNF diploma, we take some comfort in knowing that some of the students who leave UNF go on to other schools to get their degrees. In fact, somewhere between 54 to 57 percent of our native freshmen will get their degrees from UNF or some other SUS school. If we make the map larger and count any, or at least most colleges in the U.S., 61 to 65 percent of our native students will graduate with their bachelor’s degree within six years of taking their first classes at UNF. That is certainly better, but it’s not what you or I want to see. Based on the quality of students we admit, 65 percent or better should be getting their bachelor’s degrees from UNF and close to 80 percent should be getting a diploma from some college or university. So what do we do about this? There are numbers of things we are doing to create a Culture of Completion on this campus and as we find the right mix, we will hit our target or better.

Last year, while I was delivering my convocation address, I talked about one of our bolder moves – mandatory freshmen housing. We now have our first year of data on this program and it looks promising. It’s not going to be the only thing we have to do, but it is likely to be part of our plan to build that Culture of Completion I talk about, at least for several years.

Ninety percent of the students we admitted last fall were required to live on campus. Ten percent were given exemptions for one reason or another and 84.3 percent of the students who lived on campus are back with us, compared to 80 percent of those who lived off campus. Those students
who lived on campus also had higher grade point averages and took and completed more credit hours. Now when we look at who had the higher high school grade-point average and SAT score, it wasn’t the students living on campus. The students who lived off campus had a slightly higher profile coming in. But the students who lived on campus had more success in their first year.

It is still premature to declare the program a success, but it certainly looks like it’s going to be. Institutional Research, Jay Coleman and Tom Serwatka are slicing and dicing the numbers and, as we continue studying the numbers and following the mandatory housing program we’ll keep you informed. This is likely to be a part of the resolution to our challenge.

Oh, and for those of you who worried about the cost to students, we have worked hard with Housing, Chartwells, Admissions and Financial Aid, along with Melonie Handerson in my office, to ensure that money wouldn’t stop a student from coming to campus. I think when we compare the numbers for last year, we are likely to remain as the SUS campus with the lowest percent of students and the lowest dollar amount of student loans in the system.

Stay tuned for more information. We are combining these efforts with increased campus life, better student tracking and other measures in building that Culture of Completion on this campus, giving our students and our city a better university and a better educated population.

Thank you for joining us this morning and more importantly, thank you for making our collective vision move toward reality. You are an incredible group of people to work with and I count myself a very fortunate person to be part of this family.