Welcome to the kickoff of a new year.

By many of the metrics that we review, UNF is improving dramatically. The entering SAT score of our freshmen continue to jump and our freshman-to-sophomore retention rate continues to increase. Our graduation rates have also increased. We stopped enrollment growth in the wake of the economic recession to preserve class size, which continues to remain the smallest of any of Florida’s state universities. We've added about 1.5 million square feet of space in the last eight years, which essentially makes one third of this campus brand new.

My goal when I came here was the get rid of the portables. I think we have two left and these will be gone within a year. The landscaping improvements have clearly made us what I believe to be the prettiest campus in Florida.

The Sierra Club just named the University of North Florida one of the country’s “Top 100 Cool Schools.” That may be my favorite of the several national recognitions that we've gotten of late. The Princeton Review puts us in the top 8 percent of the universities across the country and Forbes listed us as number 19 of the best values.

Next year we are requiring mandatory housing for our freshmen and we didn’t even have freshmen until 1984. The reason for this action is that many studies show that students who live on campus their first year have a significantly higher graduation rate than those who do not. In pursuing this policy, we will, of course, provide opportunities for waivers for those who have some hardships.

Our alumni donations are now at the highest rate ever, with a huge jump over the last two years. This is a sign of the alumni’s affection for the university and our faculty. Our capital campaign has now raised over $100 million of our $110 million goal. Four years ago we actually thought about abandoning the campaign in the wake of the recession. But these numbers are a sign of our community’s and our alum’s interest and affection for this university.

Now imagine what we could do if the economy was able to allow the Legislature to provide us with more revenue. The economy clearly had devastating impacts on higher education, even though the Legislature cut higher education less than it cut the school systems, prisons and Medicaid. The stories across the country are frankly horrifying. Arizona appears to be devastated. In Ohio, I visited a university that is considering tearing down some buildings in the core of campus because it cannot afford to heat and cool them, and they’ve had enrollment drops. In Michigan the economy has devastated the auto industry. California was previously sort of braggadocio about both of its systems, but is now facing severe issues. Illinois is near bankrupt and its legislature was seriously behind in distributing the funding to universities. The universities had to borrow millions of dollars just for payroll and the electric bill. Although Pennsylvania State University was built with state money, it is now funded almost entirely by tuition and external funding, making it no longer really a public university. In the Pennsylvania system, which competes with the Penn State system, the Chancellor has been cutting programs at the various campuses across the state, eliminating departments. North Carolina, which just a few years ago was threatening to raid Florida universities’
faculty, is now looking at layoffs. Nine of the ten sister universities in Florida laid off faculty, even tenured faculty, and there are rumors at two institutions that more are to come this year.

When I looked at these, I found that it’s easy to shut down a program. You can do that overnight, but it takes a decade to build a program. At UNF, our budget priority was to preserve our quality programs and preserve our jobs, despite the state budget reductions.

Certainly the economy has soured the political debate. I had some time off this summer and I took some of that time to reflect on things that I’d like to try to change at the University of North Florida. There are many of those and I’m just going to talk about one today.

I had time to watch, in horror, as Congress and the President bickered over the budget. Political debate is always charged. Jefferson and Lincoln suffered horribly. On the floor of Congress in the lead up to the Civil War, one congressman took his walking cane and nearly beat a fellow congressman to death. Today the pretense of civility is gone, although physical beatings don’t seem to exist.

UNF is not immune and our own internal relationships and processes like tenure, promotion and evaluation can also be charged. Tough decisions by management can hurt and perceptions of colleagues will differ. We do need to be candid and frank, but politeness, courtesy and civility should be the tone.

Just last year, some very vile language was used between colleagues, some of which ended up in our local paper, reflecting poorly on and embarrassing the university. This was the kind of a culture that existed at General Motors – sort of a we/they thing. We understand the traditions in the academy but I believe a modern university that can rise above that culture, becoming an easier, friendlier and warmer place to work.

As many of you may recall, I’m an attorney and I practiced as a courthouse lawyer in the 1980s. Litigation is, by its definition and very nature, contentious. Lawyers on either side are ethically required to zealously represent their clients. Anyone who has gone through a divorce recognizes what that means. By and large in Jacksonville, the attorneys historically have treated each other civilly. They would agree to a continuance of a hearing or a trial to accommodate scheduling conflicts of an opposing lawyer. They would promptly respond to letters and emails requesting documents. They would promptly return phone calls between attorneys. But in the 1980s what was referred to as the South Florida practice, moved to Jacksonville with sharper elbows, argumentative tones and stalling in producing documents. The local bar set up a simple practice allowing attorneys to refer an offending attorney. The local bar would then assign a senior judge or an attorney to counsel and mentor the lawyer. It was completely voluntary, with nothing being recorded and no disciplinary action taken. There would just be a visit from a senior statesman or stateswoman. I'm not suggesting such a practice at UNF, but I would like us to take some of this year to consider whether we can address the civility issue as it exists in higher education and on our campus. Our faculty may be satisfied with the current state of affairs but possibly some activity by the Faculty Association or the union might be in order – perhaps a dialogue, a committee or a task force. I hope this concept
triggers a response. Again, we have many, many issues to address and many will involve money. But this issue involves dialogue and is a healthy place to start.

In closing, I’ll use the words of Rodney King, a victim of a police beating in Los Angeles, “why can’t we all just get along?”

Thank you, and congratulations to all of the faculty being recognized today.