Each January, I have an opportunity to examine multi-volume dossiers of tenure applications. In doing this, I often marvel at what our faculty has accomplished. Having done this for the last several years, it is clear that you work alongside colleagues with very impressive records of teaching, research and service.

While looking through these dossiers, I have often thought this would be a good exercise for academic administrators, including presidents. In fact, it would be a worthy activity for institutions, as a whole, to go through every six or seven years. We do our annual reports and get our annual evaluations, but what does our work look like when measured over time?

When it came time to write this year’s convocation address, I began to think of it as mini-dossier that would look at the change the university has undergone since 2003, when I joined the university, and a time to reflect on the work we have done as a team. At the same time, I also wanted to layout a picture of what the future might look like over the next seven to eight years.

I delivered an inaugural address on this stage in which I offered direction for the course I believed UNF was to travel as we reached for greatness. I can also remember what I would call “the years of plenty” which followed that speech. Those years were of a growing faculty, growing budget and growing enrollment. They were years in which we launched several new initiatives: two new doctoral degrees, new master’s degrees in several fields, our Transformational Learning Opportunities program and our flagship programs, to name a few.

At the same time, I am quite cognizant of the terrible economic pains that this campus, this state and this country, along with most of the world, have faced over the past three years. In reflecting on all of this, the good and the bad, I am convinced that although we should not, and cannot, easily dismiss the difficulties we have faced, we would be foolish to discount our numerous successes. When we consider all of these together, I believe we have more to celebrate than to lament. We have built well on all that was accomplished in the 31 years before fall 2003.

I also assert that UNF is well positioned to play a critical role in building a “new normal” that can and should be better than the “old normal.” Our “new normal” will be a major influence on building a New Florida. Our workforce is fewer in numbers than we were in 2007, but this is not the result of the layoffs we have seen at sister institutions and layoffs which continue at places like Florida State University. This fall we are changing that trend.

Our budgets have been cut and we have asked more from everyone on campus, but we have continued to graduate increasing numbers of students who are absolutely necessary if Jacksonville is to develop the knowledge-based economy we are seeking through the New Florida Initiative. We have also continued support for other elements that are core to our mission; for example, student scholarships and faculty research.

In that 2004 address, I listed nine areas of focus and I’ll discuss a few of those now.
Seven years ago, I said we must attract and retain a quality faculty. When I made that statement, UNF employed 492 faculty members. By 2007, we increased the total number of faculty to 572 and we were close to closing the previously growing gap between student enrollment and the size of our faculty. Regrettably, with budget cuts, that 2007 increase to 572 slipped to 547 last fall. However, this fall we brought that number up to 563, which is nine faculty members below our high. This means we actually have two more faculty among these ranks than we did in fall 2007, which was our highest year until now. We will add two more next year, which is a 20 percent increase in faculty.

When I first arrived, we were hiring a new assistant professors below market rate. At the same time, we were losing large numbers of senior and founding faculty members to retirement. With fewer faculty members at the rank of professor with higher pay, and greater numbers of new faculty at the assistant level, who were being hired at below market rates, our overall average salaries weren’t keeping up with those at other institutions. Recognizing these facts, in the past few years, we worked to change some of the metrics. We are now offering more competitive salaries for our newest faculty members and we are giving them release time to help them succeed in the tenure and promotion process. As a result, the number of individuals who are moving up the ranks is growing. We went from 24 percent of our faculty in the associate professor rank to 28 percent.

Promotion is a critical strategy to closing the pay gap we see when we compare our overall faculty salaries to other institutions. Over the past seven years, we have continually given the largest pay raises of the State University System, despite three years of budget shortfalls.

Without question, the Board of Trustees recognizes and is fully committed to the fact that we must invest more in salaries across the campus and among all academic ranks. To move the needle on the overall average salary, we need to support people’s work toward promotion and we need to keep hiring assistant professors at more competitive rates, and we need consistent and reasonable annual raises. Each of these is absolutely necessary and we have been working on all three of these fronts over the past seven years.

Seven years ago, we also spoke about our need to attract, retain and reward quality students. In fall 2003, our average freshman SAT was 1151, and we were offering $2.3 million in merit-based aid, above and beyond Bright Futures dollars. This fall, the average SAT is 1203, a 52-point increase, and we are offering $5.3 million in merit scholarships. In fall 2003, we were admitting 62 percent of the freshmen who applied. This fall 2010, we admitted 42 percent of the freshmen who applied. We are becoming a more selective school with a strong commitment to increasing diversity. Barron’s now ranks UNF among the more competitive schools in the country.

When parents and students are looking for strong universities, one of the numbers they look at is six-year graduation rates. Of those students who begin as fulltime freshmen, what percentage of them graduate within six years of entering college. This number is also used for ranking schools nationally.

Over the same time frame, we moved our retention rate from 78 to 83 percent. This bodes well for improving our six-year graduation rates in the upcoming years. But obviously we can’t be satisfied with that. We need to push harder. We need our retention rates to be consistently in the mid to high 80s and our graduation rates need to climb toward 60 percent and above.
Admitting strong students has certainly been a goal on this campus and it’s a goal we will continue to pursue. But admitting strong students isn’t the end; it’s the beginning of the process. These young women and men deserve a top-quality education.

In 2003, I spoke about one program that we were going to initiate, a program we call Transformational Learning Opportunities (TLOs), a term coined by Provost Workman. Today, when I go out into the community, I hear parents’ praises about their child’s experience in a particular TLO. When I go to faculty meetings, I get questions asking about continued and increased funding for these programs.

Faculty has been phenomenally creative in designing TLOs. And most importantly, when I meet with students who have engaged in some of the best of these experiences, I see a change in their eyes and in their respect for their educational experience. Our commitment to TLOs is becoming one of the hallmarks of our institution.

Students learn a great deal in the classroom, but when we take them into the community they apply their knowledge in ways that no PowerPoint, no clicker and no smart board could ever offer; eyes-on and hands-on experiences.

In the 2004 address, I also proposed the idea that we invest additional resources to create 5 to 10 flagship or signature academic programs where UNF was already poised to become an acknowledged leader. Seven years later, we have four of those programs up and running, (1) Community-Based Nursing program, (2) the Transportation and Logistics program, (3) the Coastal Biology program and (4) the International Business program. When we look at what these programs have accomplished with the modest investments, I think we can declare the initiative a success and one worthy of our continuing commitment.

In 2008, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing awarded our Community-Based Nursing program its Innovations in Professional Nursing Award, no small accolade. Just this year, the Transportation and Logistics program was rated as 14th in the country, when ranked by research productivity, and the 13 ahead all are doctoral programs. And this past year, the UNF International Business program joined the University of Warsaw School of Management in hosting the 10th Annual International Business Conference. During this year, we will be looking at the possibility of adding one or more new programs.

When I first drove onto UNF’s campus, there were times I thought I was driving into a 1960s shopping mall. There was a lack of creativity in our architecture and our landscaping failed to blend the core of campus into our natural surroundings. Since then, I came to learn that I was not alone on campus. In fact, there was a distinguished faculty lecture on this very topic at convocation several years ago.

Fortunately, at that time, we were in a master planning process. And even more fortunately, we have been blessed by the Legislature with an abundance of brick-colored money. Brick-colored money are those dollars that come from Tallahassee which can only be used for buildings and infrastructure. At
the same time, we were cramped for space and no reasonable or responsible growth could happen without adding to our space inventory.

In July 2003, we started with 2.9 million square feet of buildings on campus. As of July 2010, we have 4 million square feet, and when we complete construction on the biology building, the new Disability Resources Center, and the new Student Wellness Center, over the next year, we will hit 4.2 million. This will be a 45 percent increase in our square footage over eight years or an increase of 1.3 million square feet.

We have added some very attractive buildings which are also LEED certified, meaning they have scored high in the environmental quality by a national organization. In fact, UNF constructed the first and third LEED building in all of North Florida.

In the middle of this construction, we were also lucky to woo Chuck Hubbuck, UNF’s horticulturist, away from the zoo and onto our campus. Then the grounds began changing. I’m not sure that I am not a bit jealous, but I often hear Chuck referred to as the man who changed the face of UNF. Of course, he and his team, along with everyone in facilities planning, did just that. They have dramatically changed the face of campus along with our campus architect, Zak Ovadia.

In the earlier address, I also spoke about the need to capitalize on and increase our funding sources. That year, UNF’s endowment was $43 million. I said that within six years we needed to hit $100 million. As I joke with my friends, we hit that mark, and we hit it a few years early. The only problem is it lasted for about 35 minutes before the stock market crashed. Now we are again working to grow that endowment with a $110 million Power of Transformation capital campaign. At this point, we have reached the $73 million mark. We should hit our original goal in about two to three years.

Another number we have succeeded in growing, is our contract and grant awards. We have taken these numbers from $14 million to $17 million, a 22 percent increase. When we look at direct Federal awards, these numbers have climbed at a faster pace, going from $10 million to $14 million, a 40 percent increase. Next year promises to be even better. Much of the work under our newest grants has strong potential for technology transfer such as fuel cell batteries.

Very possibly, the most important of all of our fiscal successes has been the fact that during the last year the Legislature and the Governor have come to recognize that Florida’s future is tied to higher education.

I believe we are well positioned to move into the future, ready for growth and change to that “new normal” which seems more promising to me than it might to some pundits. It’s a “new normal” that includes a New Florida that recognizes the importance of higher education in building our economy and our cultural life.

So what might this “new normal” look like on UNF’s campus? With modest growth in the economy, within the next eight years, we will top 20,000 students on our campus. Over 4,000 of our undergraduates should be living on campus and we need greater diversity of all types among our
students. In the “new normal,” I would like to see our student-to-faculty ratio reduced to 16 to 1, and our six year graduation rate climbing to 60 percent or better.

In 35 percent of our classes we should have fewer than 20 students sitting in their chairs or at their computers. We need to revitalize our commitment to a strong connection between faculty and student, which is to identify and distinguish ourselves from our peers.

I also see significantly greater campus life, with student programming 24-7. The data tell us that if we want to improve retention and graduation rates and offer our students the total college experience, we need to pay closer attention to this campus dynamic.

If we are to engage in a critical role in building a New Florida and a better Jacksonville, we need to work on research that leads to technology transfer and improves our local knowledge base. We also need to encourage greater civic and cultural engagement.

UNF will also be recognized as the school of first choice. That means in the “new normal,” we must shed our inferiority complex, and recognize and live up to our inherent strengths.

Down the road, our Board of Trustees, and you willing, I plan on standing on this dais and pulling out this year’s convocation address to chart the progress we have made over the previous five to seven years. We can then take a look at how the “new normal” at UNF compares to predictions and aspirations.

Our movement to the “new normal” and the New Florida is dependent, in large part, on the attitudes and mind sets of many people, including those of us in this auditorium. I ask you to celebrate a year that is already better than last year and to look forward to the years to come. I also ask you to remember all that we have accomplished to date, while we continue to take care of those who are still suffering. And finally, I ask you to be part of what will make the “new normal” better than the “old normal.”