State of the University Address
Fall Convocation
September 25, 2009, 9:15 a.m.
McDougald-McLendon Gymnasium
Chancellor Charlie Nelms

Good Morning!

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge our platform guests, especially including our trustees, … elected officials, … and clergy.

This is the State of the University Address so it is incumbent upon me to offer you my assessment. I liken the state of the university to a marine weather forecast. We’re coping with seas three to four feet high, with a chance of showers and thunderstorms, but there’s a high-pressure system ahead.

Despite the financial tsunami, growing competitive pressures, and burgeoning enrollment, the university is on the right course. We’re weathering the rough seas because there are enough people on this campus who take personal responsibility for seeing us through.

They’re the faculty who always have their grades in on time and place their book orders long before the deadline. They’re the staff who pass two or three sleepless nights making sure all is in place for graduation. They’re the administrators who’ve accepted that giving up your evenings and weekends is just part of the job.

To these people, and you know who you are, I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation. You make this institution work.

This year, we’re celebrating 100 years of truth and service. The Centennial presents us with a once in a lifetime opportunity

• To reflect on the past and plot a new course for the future;
• To celebrate our accomplishments while paying homage to the men and women who gave unselfishly of their time, talents, and resources to make the university what it is today; and
• To envision the NCCU of the next century based on the solid foundation established by those who came before us.

Dr. Shepard’s plan was clear. Is our purpose now as obvious? Over the course of 100 years of truth and service, some 40 thousand graduates have significantly influenced our society, in North Carolina, throughout the United States and the world.

They have impacted school districts, police departments, and the nursing corps, public libraries, the legal profession and the judiciary. They’ve swelled the ranks of speech therapists and social workers and diversified the ranks of corporate America.

But legally mandated segregation is over, and racism is less raw, less pervasive and less pernicious now than it was then. How will the next 100 years be different for people of color in general and NCCU in particular?

This is a singular opportunity, a natural moment for reflection brought on by the Centennial but certainly bolstered by NCCU’s increasing national stature. How then do we enhance the distinction and distinctiveness of NCCU?

I believe it’s by being clear about our expectations regarding teaching, learning, and service. Anything less than excellence is unacceptable.
It was former President Alfonso Elder and then Chancellor LeRoy Walker who adopted the phrase “Excellence without excuse!” But we can’t get there without focus and accountability.

NCCU cannot be all things to all people. That’s what the flagship research universities are for. We need to offer programs that give us a competitive advantage, but make no mistake: We must refocus and recommit ourselves to our liberal arts core.

An NCCU graduate will speak well, write well, and become a leader in the community. Our graduates will communicate to succeed.

The Office of University Accreditation under the direction of the one and only Dr. Pauletta Bracy has successfully stewarded NCCU through its 10-year SACS re-accreditation process. We will be receiving official confirmation of that in December. Meanwhile, the efforts to enhance our students’ communication skills are underway under the aegis of the Quality Enhancement Plan titled Communicating to Succeed.

Helping our students learn to communicate properly must be a campus-wide effort. The English Department cannot do it all on its own. Faculty, whether you teach trigonometry or abnormal psychology; we need you to commit yourselves to improving the quality of the written and oral presentations of our students.

Staff, when students speak to you using improper grammar, correct them. It’s a competitive world out there and for our graduates to have a fighting chance, we must help them gain the soft skills they need to succeed.

Listen up students! The next writing studio is Wednesday, September 30, at 7:30 p.m., in the Shepard Library, room 140. If you need help, help is available. Take advantage of the opportunities and services we provide and commit to graduation as your destination.

What is the mission of NCCU? Taking into consideration our presence in the UNC system and the competitive forces that impact us, our role is to serve the broad spectrum of society — black, white and brown, rural and urban. We need to meet the needs of the citizens of this state. And it is the State of North Carolina that will drive our development.

To better reach the small towns and villages in the mountains to the west or the eastern counties, we must expand our online instruction. We may have been teaching teachers for a very long time but we have not been teaching them online for very long at all.

How do we tell our story? The most effective and persuasive way to tell our story is through the successes of our graduates and our faculty. Their performance, their work ethic, their commitment to excellence will tell our story.

Satisfied graduates and satisfied employers will tell our story. They’re telling our story every day. People like Judge and former Board of Trustees Chair Cressie Thigpen, former Congresswoman Eva Clayton, the first black woman to represent the state in the U.S. House of Representatives, and N.C. State Senator Dan Blue, the first African-American to serve as Speaker of the N.C. House.

They tell the story of NCCU. Our students here on campus can tell our story too by taking an independent tack and speaking out about the need to dress appropriately or Study Hard on the Yard.

There has been a lot of good news emanating from our campus this past year and we’re telling these stories on Facebook, MySpace and Twitter as well as through more traditional media.

NCCU Law is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year and, as if on cue, it received a huge accolade. Based on measures of affordability, bar passage rate, and job placement, for the second year in a row National Jurist Magazine ranked our Law School No. 1 Best Value Law School in the Nation.
The School of Business brought Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus to campus and the School of Law hosted Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr.

NCCU was awarded a five-year, $5 million grant from NASA to establish the NASA Center for Aerospace Research and Education. Dr. Branislov Vlahovic is the principal investigator. His research team will be developing advanced devices, sensors, and detectors, for the space program.

Our Jazz Ensemble performed at the legendary Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, Rhode Island with artist-in-residence Branford Marsalis. NCCU students were on stage with Chaka Khan, Mos Def, and Tony Bennett.

This fall, we enrolled the largest freshman class in the history of the university, 1,347 freshmen, an astounding 30 percent increase over last year. There were 30 percent more transfer students too. My thanks to the enrollment services team under the leadership of Associate Vice Chancellor Sharon Oliver, LuAnn Edmonds-Harris, and Michael Bailey.

Thanks also to the Residential Life staff under the leadership of Director Jennifer Wilder who worked tirelessly to house our new recruits. The influx helped ensure that NCCU exceeded the target set for us by G.A. with a total enrollment figure of 8,575.

However, G.A. has shifted away from its high emphasis on enrollment growth to increased concern about student-learning outcomes like persistence and graduation rates. In this new environment, our restructured University College looks like it is having a positive impact.

Under the leadership of Dean Bernice Duffy Johnson, our first-to-second-year persistence rate has increased nearly 10 percentage points, to 77 percent. Of course, Dr. Johnson assures me she will not rest until we have achieved 100 percent retention rate. Isn’t that right Dean Johnson?

This year has been a constant struggle to try to protect the academic core and full-time staff as much as possible from the impact of the budget cuts. My heartfelt thanks and appreciation go to Vice Chancellors Alan Robertson and Kwesi Aggrey, co-chairs of the Budget Committee. As a result of their budget deliberations, no occupied full-time instructional, research, campus safety, or student services positions were impacted.

Because the faculty stepped up to teach the maximum number of students in the maximum number of courses, the university did not have to cancel a single class. The rest of the savings were found by reducing telecommunications, travel, supplies, contractual services, equipment, and furniture.

I also wish to congratulate the facilities staff for making our campus more beautiful. More than a million dollars were spent on replacing broken sidewalks and landscaping the sloping hills of NCCU and I think it has been money well spent.

After all, this is your home, students. Thank you for helping us to keep it beautiful whether it’s Make a Difference Day or not.

The new W.G. Pearson Cafeteria opened in March with seating for over 1,200, a separate take-out bar, lower level café, and convenience store. This facility has quickly become an instant favorite.

On the horizon, there’s a new building for our Nursing Program. A 65,000 square foot, $25 million nursing facility will enable the doubling of our nursing enrollment from 125 to 250 students. To make room for the nursing department’s new home, historic Holy Cross Catholic Church will be moved to Fayetteville Street beside the Shepard House and repurposed as a gathering space for NCCU and the community.

Construction will begin soon on the Latham Parking Deck that will cost $15 million and provide parking for 750. At ground level, the deck will also accommodate a coffee shop, bookstore, and police substation.
The historically large freshmen class has brought home to us the serious need for more living space. The $30 million Chidley North Residence Hall will accommodate 520 rooms and will complement the existing Chidley Main, which will be completely renovated at a future date.

Improving the quality of campus life for students is one of my highest priorities. Something as simple as putting lights on the track so students can walk at night, making improvements to the Walker Complex and expanding its hours, turfing the football field, and joining the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference or MEAC so that we can again compete with some historic rivals and enjoy some great contests.

There were more accolades. With congratulations to the Academic Community Service Learning Program, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching included NCCU in its selection of universities for their Community Engagement classification. The designation recognizes institutions that have internalized and sustained their commitment to collaborate with communities through teaching, research, and outreach.

The Veterans Administration has also designated us as a military friendly university. And finally, my favorite, US News & World Report ranked North Carolina Central University in the top ten HBCUs in the country — and first among public HBCUs. There are some private schools that beat us out but we are the number one public HBCU in the country.

It’s clear that we are on the right course. So, how do we build sustainable support for the university? I have outlined five priorities for giving. The first and most obvious is merit-based scholarships and need-based grants. Now, more than ever, the need is overwhelming, as unemployment has pushed the dream of higher education out of reach for many students. Where would you be were it not for the education you received?

The second priority is to help underwrite study abroad. Nothing does more to expand one’s view of the world than to see it for themselves, but this has become a luxury for our students.

The third priority is to create distinguished professorships and invest in faculty development, because a high quality education begins and ends with a high quality faculty.

Next, we want to support and develop readiness and outreach programs for the community. If students come to us better prepared, they are more likely to persist to graduation.

Finally, we are striving to make NCCU a beautiful place to come home to, while honoring the historic neighborhood surrounding this campus. We’re looking for your assistance in restoring our campus and the neighboring community to their former glory.

For our part, we need to become excellent stewards of the resources entrusted to us. We must embrace a code of greater transparency and professionalism and provide an account of how we used the resources to advance the mission.

And you may take our measure by the number of students we enroll, retain, and award degrees. We must educate and graduate character-centered students who can think critically and analytically, communicate exceptionally well orally, in writing, and interpersonally — students who have an appreciation for other cultures and a passion for creating a more equitable world for all of its inhabitants.

Andy Grove, CEO of Intel is famously quoted as saying, “Always assume it’s your responsibility.”

Here is the challenge that I place before you today. To all of us in leadership positions, approach every challenge or opportunity from the perspective of personal responsibility. If each of us assumes that payroll is our responsibility, then what wouldn’t we do to ensure that our people are paid on time? If each of us assumes that facilities management is our responsibility, then why wouldn’t we pick up the trash on our way in to the office? Or on our way to class?
In this way, we can begin to effect change in a culture that simply pushes responsibility up, down, or sideways but never takes it to heart.

This Centennial Year, we have the largest freshman class in the history of this university. Commit to making the class of 2013 the largest graduating class in history. Assume personal responsibility for the retention and graduation of each of these 1,347 freshmen.

Students, I believe in you. We believe in you! We’ve admitted you in the knowledge that we have everything you need to be successful. My challenge to you is to assume personal responsibility for your success. Don’t blame your professors, your advisors or use your personal challenges as excuses.

I grew up in the segregated South. I decided very early in life that I was not going to let anyone else be responsible for my failure. Conversely, I knew I was responsible for my success. When you truly own the responsibility for your success, you make optimal use of the resources the university has to offer.

The seas are three to four feet high, with a chance of showers and thunderstorms, but there’s a high-pressure system ahead.

I predict NCCU will sail smoothly into the future.