State of the University Address
Fall Convocation
September 24, 2010, 9:15 a.m.
McDougald-McLendon Gymnasium
Chancellor Charlie Nelms

Good Morning!

In thinking about what I would say to you about the state of the university, I pictured myself as a screenwriter commissioned to write the screenplay about the story of this university.

Was I Tyler Perry? I loved the Madea films but that’s not me. … Spike Lee? I respect that activist attitude but those glasses don’t fit Charlie Nelms.

No, I wanted to think of myself more like another August Wilson, the author of Fences and the Piano Lesson. Or maybe Toni Morrison….author of Beloved. Okay, maybe not!

Screenplays are enhanced by stunning visual settings. And every day, North Carolina Central University is becoming a more picturesque backdrop to the life-stories of each and every one of our students, faculty and staff.

The relocation of the Centennial Chapel and the creation of the Centennial Garden have resulted in a scenic remodeling of historic Fayetteville Street that the entire community can enjoy.

With many thanks to Zack Abegunrin and his team in Facilities Management, and Phillip Powell and his groundskeepers in Facilities Services, NCCU is a much more beautiful place to call home. They even built a place for my film crew to park!

A screenplay would be nothing without challenges to overcome.

Certainly, it was a challenge to found this institution at the height of the terror that was the Jim Crow South. It was a challenge to keep the doors open when the coffers were empty. And it’s a challenge now to face budget cut after budget cut in this devastating economy.

We were presented with the hard choice of raising tuition beyond our comfort level or cutting academic services. We chose to protect the academic core and avoid layoffs. As a consequence of that decision, a burdensome but unavoidable tuition increase was placed on the shoulders of our students.

I want to assure you that we are working very hard to increase the amount of private scholarship aid available to you. Unfortunately, this part of the story isn’t over. I’ve been asked to produce budget reduction scenarios of another five and ten percent for the next fiscal year.

It’s like walking a tightrope to comply with these demands to cut the budget while avoiding irreversible damage to the academic core or to the spirit of the NCCU community.

This brings me to the stars of my movie: the faculty, staff and students of this university.

I’ll have to tell the story of the dedication of our faculty and staff to the mission of this university. I have to write about their commitment of energy, time and sometimes, even their own resources to help take our students from where they are to where they want to be.

All this, and I am painfully aware, you haven’t had a raise in two years! I thank you for your devotion to this university.
To the freshman class, and to all the sophomores, juniors and seniors with us today, I thank you for choosing NCCU when you could have gone somewhere else. In doing so, you chose graduation as your destination! And here’s what you’ll be wearing for your final scene!

As actors, you might ask, “What’s my motivation?” I would have to answer that each of you must reach down into your souls and find your own personal reason to persevere even when it’s really, really hard.

Let me tell you a story that might offer you some inspiration. We’ve invited Navy SEAL David Goggins to speak to you next month. Mark your calendars for Oct. 19, at 6 p.m., in the B.N. Duke Auditorium.

Even though he professes to hate running, biking and swimming, Goggins has competed in some of the most extreme distance races and triathlons ever devised to test the human body.

He placed second in the Ultraman World Championships triathlon in Hawaii — The race begins with 6 miles of swimming, then 260 miles of cycling, and finishes up with a 52-mile run. More than 318 miles of pain and agony and he hates it.

So, how could he be so successful? Goggins has a goal. No, Goggins has a mission. In 2005, at the age of 35, David entered competitive endurance racing as a way to honor his fellow SEALs who were killed in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan. His aim was to raise money for the Special Operations Warrior Fund, which provides college scholarships to the children of those killed in combat operations.

To make a real difference, he knew it would take something extreme to capture the public’s attention and support. So, he set out to qualify for the most difficult endurance race in the world, the Badwater 135. To make himself eligible, Goggins competed in a 100-mile marathon in San Diego. The trouble was, he’d never run a marathon before, not even the 26-mile kind.

Weighing 280 pounds, he broke multiple bones in his feet, and his kidneys failed — but he met his goal and was accepted into Badwater. The Badwater 135 starts at Badwater Basin in California’s Death Valley, 282 feet below sea level and ends 135 miles later at the 14,500-foot summit of Mount Whitney. That’s right, you’re running uphill for 135 miles — in July, when temperatures in Death Valley can reach 120 degrees.

In just six months, between his near-death experience in San Diego and Badwater, Goggins trained relentlessly and lost nearly 100 pounds. With a time of 30 hours, 32 minutes, David came in fifth place in Badwater and raised $20,000. Since then, he has competed in nearly 30 ultra-endurance races, including improved showings at Badwater, and he continues to compete as an ultra cyclist. And he’s close to reaching his fund-raising goal of $1 million.

So tell me now why you can’t graduate from North Carolina Central University with a degree in four years’ time!

You have a goal. No, you have a mission. There are people out there counting on you to do it. And the power is there in your mind, heart and soul, to make it happen, even if it’s a subject you hate, even if your friends are calling you out, or you’re feeling tired or blue.

You can do it. Success is your only viable option! I have personally reviewed the admissions files of many of you and I’m convinced you possess the intellectual prowess to succeed at NCCU.

Here’s the challenge: Will you do the work to make it happen? We will do everything in our power to help you. NCCU is now judged on the basis of its four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rates. I will be held accountable to reach the goals of 80 percent first-to-second-year retention, and a six-year graduation rate of 53 percent, by 2012.

I am accountable to the UNC President, our Board of Trustees and to the Board of Governors, but I am also accountable to you. So I have insisted that the emphasis of faculty evaluations must be on student learning first, research second.
Faculty will be assessed based on your success, your

- Retention and graduation
- Pass rates
- State or national certification results
- Entry to graduate programs, and
- Post-graduate employment.

These statistics tell the story, in part, of faculty effectiveness. And my administrative colleagues and I will help faculty to meet you where you live, in the world of technology.

But don’t get the wrong impression. There is little our faculty and staff don’t know about how to take you from where you are to where you only imagined you could be. NCCU faculty and staff are some of the most dedicated in the nation.

This month marks the second year in a row that U.S. News & World Report has ranked NCCU as the number one public HBCU in the country. Two years in a row means it was no accident. Faculty and staff, the nation knows you’re doing a great job.

I was thrilled and grateful to you for this acknowledgment. But there’s one more accolade that I was even more proud to see us receive. The Southern Regional Education Board published a study last April in which they could find only 15 public bachelor’s- and master’s-level universities across the country that presented a six-year graduation rate better than 45 percent, with students that other universities would consider a bad risk.

This is evidence that NCCU does more to help students overcome the odds! And it’s happening all across the campus!

With Dean Raymond Pierce at the helm, the Law School was ranked as the No. 1 Best Value Law School in the country by the National Jurist magazine for two years in a row. But that important ranking is not based just on affordability, it also reflects bar passage rate, and successful job placement. Last week, the Law School received $1.9 million in federal stimulus money to provide low-income residents greater access to legal services. In addition, with this new funding the Law School will now offer legal writing seminars to you undergraduates to better prepare you for law school.

Under the capable leadership of Dean Bernice Duffy Johnson, the University College is a hub of academic support services for freshmen and sophomores. In weekly advising and mentoring sessions, we offer tutorials. We expect writing assignments. We conduct progress reviews, and we help students set goals and plan their academic and post-graduate careers.

I reported last fall that after the first year of this program, our freshman-to-sophomore retention rate increased from 68 to 77 percent. Our primary goal is enhancing student success. To accomplish this, we’re putting our money where our mouth is. After an initial investment of $1.2 million to kick-start the University College program, this fall we’ve dedicated another $300,000 to expand academic advising for juniors and seniors. In addition, we officially opened the Writing and Speaking Studio in the Taylor Education Building, Room 102. Under the direction of Ms. Regina Alston and Dr. Karen Keaton Jackson, the NCCU graduate will come to be known in the marketplace as one who can write well and speak well, someone who communicates to succeed.

Under the leadership of Vice Chancellor Kevin Rome in Student Affairs, we have two projects in the works directed to African-American males. Will the Centennial Scholars in the house please stand? Thank you. Now I’m going to talk about you!

The Centennial Scholars program invites incoming black male freshmen who are also Pell Grant eligible to apply. Last year, a total of 57 students participated in this pilot program. They took an out-of-state field trip together, they volunteered at our Habitat for Humanity house, served as tutors at the local elementary and middle schools, and coached at the Boys and Girls Club.
In addition to the academic tutoring they received through University College, these students were monitored and mentored for one hour a week by Kent Williams and Jason Dorsette; 86 percent of this first cohort was retained from first to second year. With an ultimate goal of 3.0, their average GPA for the year was a promising 2.78.

This fall, we’ve offered the program to another group of freshmen, bringing the total number involved to 225, at a cost of nearly $400,000. Our objective is to serve 500 participants by Fall 2012.

A second program for African-American males is just getting off the ground. It’s called First in Flight and it is under the leadership of Student Affairs’ Tia Doxey. This program targets low-income black males who are first generation college entrants. Through parent and student workshops, we’re addressing gaps in their understanding of college life and its requirements. We assisted with admissions procedures, making the connection between curriculum and career, financial literacy, information technology and the particular stress of being first in their families to attend college.

Often, these students carry the burden of all their family’s hopes and dreams for future financial wellbeing. It can be overwhelming. We’re quite hopeful that this second program also will have a significant impact on retention and graduation rates among these students.

Yes, we’ve enrolled you. We’re fully committed to your success, but not at the cost of lowered standards and expectations. We want your degree from North Carolina Central University to mean something in the marketplace.

That’s why I’m asking faculty to reevaluate allowing you to progress beyond 18 credit hours with only a 1.5 GPA. It isn’t until the beginning of your junior level, when the coursework becomes more difficult, that we require you to post a 2.0.

This sets up the situation where some of you who fail to make 2.0 in the early stages of your career have to take or retake more and more credit hours to mathematically make up the difference. Some of you can get into such a hole; you’d have to post straight A’s to dig yourselves out!

Faculty, I propose that we increase these GPA standards in two stages such that by Fall 2012, students must maintain a GPA of 2.0 to proceed from their first semester through to their last.

This change would have a significant impact. At the end of the spring 2010 semester, there was a number of students with less than or equal to 39 credit hours who posted a GPA below 2.0.

Given our current sliding scale, most were academically eligible to return, but they’re already struggling. The research is clear; we get what we expect. And because we get what we expect, we need to raise our expectations!

Once we establish the standard, the next challenge for us is to enforce it. If our policy states that students may be suspended no more than three times for insufficient academic progress, then that is what we will do.

And if we dismiss you for a semester, we’re going to impose requirements for your reinstatement, such as the completion of community college coursework with a grade of C or better. We need to know you’re really ready to pursue your degree. Students, your destination must be graduation! If it isn’t, you need to stop wasting your parents’ money and try something else.

NCCU is not just taking the lead in teaching and learning; it’s establishing its research credentials as well. Under the leadership of Dr. Hazell Reed, vice chancellor for graduate education and research, we recently were awarded a $4.3 million grant to study the impact of alcohol abuse. A team of three biology and chemistry faculty members won the competitive award with biologist Gregory J. Cole serving as co-principal investigator.
And soon, we’ll be releasing details about another $9 million award to study cancer. Congratulations!

I saved the best for last…

Our *Marching Sound Machine* is quite simply the best in the nation and soon the rest of these United States and a billion viewers around the world will know it too. We’re on our way to sending 200 band members, and a number of faculty and staff to Pasadena, California, to witness our NCCU marching band make us proud. They’ll be marching in the Rose Parade on New Year’s Day. How’s that for a happy ending?!

We’re half way to our goal of $500,000 to send them there and we’re on a roll. If you can support a musician at a level you can afford, we would be so grateful for your help in making this once in a lifetime dream come true for these outstanding Eagles. Just go to our home page and scroll down to the picture of the band and click there to find the band webpage and the all-important Give Now button.

I expect my colleagues to administer with such passion, our staff to serve with such enthusiasm and our faculty to teach with such commitment, that the confluence of their passion, enthusiasm and commitment will carry you to the finish line.

But I’m also challenging you students to take a more active role in creating and sustaining a culture of excellence and student success. Write your own scripts in which you are the hero or heroine who goes to class prepared to learn, prepared to contribute, and prepared to lead.

I’m convinced that you have some excellent ideas for what students can do to create and sustain a culture of excellence. To that end, I’ve asked Dr. Frances Graham to work with a committee of students to plan a Spring 2011 Symposium on student success.

Students will serve as the speakers and session leaders. And I’ve placed in a reserve account $100,000 to implement some of the ideas that I’m sure will emerge from this event.

I call on you now to enter a covenant with NCCU. It is a covenant of commitment to excellence, to become each other’s keeper, to pull, push and shove one another to the finish line and make sure that no one is left behind.

We won’t settle for only half of us completing the race. We’re striving for that unexpected, bigger-than-life movie ending where everyone succeeds.

I would like to close with a quotation from poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Enthusiasm is the mother of effort, and without it nothing great was ever achieved.”