Good Morning!

Welcome to the fall semester and to the Centennial Year! We had a splendid kickoff with our Charter Day celebration June 30th. We rang the bell and reenacted the signing of the Charter of Incorporation with descendents of the original founders. It was a moving moment to see those men silently rise and place their names beside the signatures of their ancestors.

The year of our incorporation, 1909, was during the worst of the Jim Crow Era. Establishing an institution of higher learning for black folk at that time was very serious business indeed. I don’t think Dr. Shepard ever would have believed that 100 years later, an African-American would be President of the United States. It’s still a little hard for me.

The pace of social, political, and economic change today makes me think of the downhill rush of the rollercoaster. You feel the wind on your face, the wave in the pit of your stomach, the exhilaration, and the fear. Since we last gathered for the University Conference, we’ve put the first black man in the White House, the first woman in the North Carolina Governor’s Office, and the first Hispanic on the U.S. Supreme Court.

These are breathtaking times to be a member of a minority in America! But change is scary too and we may be witnessing a backlash. We must restrain ourselves from answering their outrageous claims, to be drawn in to revisit our own centuries of hate. What would be the point?

If there is one lesson we can draw from the election of Barack Hussein Obama to the highest office in the land, it is that we are witnessing a serious attack on racism in America. You can’t help but notice the average age of the “Birthers.” For the most part, they appear to be of my generation.

By contrast, for all the challenges the Millennials present to us as educators, they seem to be a lot less color-conscious. And that’s wonderful. They will put America on a path to a post-racial future.

We may just be approaching a mutual understanding that there are much bigger issues to worry about than the pigmentation of one another’s skin. Not the least of these is risking our very existence on Earth by continuing to ignore global warming!

The social landscape that gave birth to North Carolina Central University was complete with legally enforced segregation. The next century of our existence is destined to be significantly different.

Right now, NCCU falls in tenth place on the list of UNC system schools on measures of racial diversity. I contend that we must find ways to diversify all aspects of the university without forgoing our historic mission. I think there will continue to be a need for this university to serve first generation African-American college students — but also Hispanic and disadvantaged white students.

Tenth place… the institutions that have made the most significant gains over the past decade include UNC Greensboro, UNC Charlotte, UNC Chapel Hill, and N.C. State University. These are our new competitors.

What do you think the NCCU student body will look like 100 years from now? Will it be 85 percent African-American as it is now or will it become more like the institutions with which we compete?
This Centennial is an opportunity to envision the next 100 years. In re-conceptualizing our role in the context of a contemporary society less defined by issues of race, I take my cue from Martin Luther King Jr., who said this in his Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1964:

“Just as nonviolence exposed the ugliness of racial injustice, so must the infection and sickness of poverty be exposed and healed—not only its symptoms but its basic causes. This, too, will be a fierce struggle, but we must not be afraid to pursue the remedy no matter how formidable the task.”

I propose we take up this unfinished work of Martin Luther King and commit ourselves to raising the standard of living of the least wealthy segment of our society, through education. In so doing, we keep faith with our best traditions and stay true to our calling and motto of Truth and Service.

We’re already in the business of guiding disproportionate numbers of less wealthy and less well-prepared students to graduation. But gone are the days when students had no choice but to come to us. If at NCCU, we are to re-cast ourselves as the best hope for the dispossessed, we have a lot of work to do.

Compared to all the UNC system schools, we stand fourth behind UNC Chapel Hill, NC State, and East Carolina University in terms of dollar appropriations per full-time equivalent student. As we all know, there has been historic underfunding in North Carolina as well as in other states with respect to HBCUs. But in 2006-2007, that per student dollar amount was 16,772. The mission differences and the profile of admitted students notwithstanding, UNC Wilmington and Western Carolina University both received more than $2,000 less per student than NCCU, and yet their four-year graduation rates placed them among the top four institutions in the system whereas NCCU held tenth place.

Our success is measured by the success of our students. In these times of budgetary restraint, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify our level of appropriation given our retention and graduation rates. We place ourselves at risk as an institution with these kinds of disappointing numbers.

The question is can we continue to resort to the lack-of-funding argument in defense of our low rates of graduation? I think not.

In the two years that I have served as chancellor at NCCU, I have been struck by the limited infrastructure available to conduct institutional research and evaluate program effectiveness. Many decisions regarding student enrollment management and retention efforts appear to have been made absent good data and adherence to best practices. Moreover, there is a recurring tendency to re-invent the wheel.

So I am seeking to establish assessment tools and protocols. I believe that the collection, analysis and dissemination of information will impact retention. We may be able to use the data to influence policy decisions related to financial aid and hopefully, to reduce loan indebtedness.

At NCCU, we must answer to our constituencies—students and their families, SACS, G.A., the media, the legislature, and an increasingly frustrated public. Choosing to bury our heads in the sand is not an ideal coping strategy. It never works out so well for the ostriches.

I guarantee we won’t be allowed to persist another quarter of a century, resting on our historical significance and oblivious to the demands of the marketplace. So I propose, going forward, we keep very close track of the success of our students and other measures of efficiency as compared to our competitors in the system. And when there is a stark discrepancy, we investigate, we innovate and we solve the problem.

We should be open to learning as much as we can from other system schools whether that is UNCW, WCU, Chapel Hill or State. Let’s find out if their higher graduation rates are a function of higher admissions standards alone. Maybe they know a better way of identifying students at risk and intervening to keep them on the path to graduation.
I feel we must bring all our talent and energy to bear on ways to bring our institution in line with and ultimately in front of comparable schools in the system. But first, you have to know where we stand. So I propose to communicate NCCU’s standing to you as frequently as I can.

Assessing institutional effectiveness really isn’t an option. Our accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, demands it. They emphasize student-learning outcomes—analyzing the message received, not just the means of delivery. SACS requires us to document the quality and value of our programs and services and to use these data to make improvements.

Whereas the Quality Service Initiative was my first foray into university-wide change, the Quality Enhancement Plan, as mandated by SACS, which we call Communicating to Succeed, will be the second. Just as we need the cooperation of everyone from the guard at the gate to the folks in student advising to step up our game in offering excellent customer service, we will need the cooperation and collaboration of everyone on campus to ensure that our students learn to communicate properly.

Student Affairs will be engaged in the program by offering speaking events and writing contests. And when these events are announced, I invite you all to attend and offer our students constructive criticism and support.

Faculty across all the disciplines, the sciences, social sciences, even biotechnology, will need to collaborate to teach effective writing and speaking skills. The English Department can’t do it all alone. Then, at graduation, the students will be assessed primarily using portfolios but also standardized tests that can be benchmarked with UNC system and Comprehensive Master’s institutions.

I cannot lead this change alone. There aren’t enough hours in the day and I’m getting old. To those of you who would join me as fellow change agents, I offer you this advice from Harvard’s John Kotter in his book co-written with Dan Cohen called The Heart of Change.

There are three enemies of progress that you will need to guard against. The first is complacency. President Obama frequently quotes Dr. King’s reference to “the fierce urgency of now.” It is taken from King’s “I have a Dream Speech” and in it, King continues, “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”

We need to adopt a sense of urgency because we live in precarious economic times. We don’t know what will happen next but we do know we are vulnerable.

The second enemy of change is fear that a new way of doing things might impact job security. I think this is an irrational fear. It’s the old, ineffective way of doing things that could get us all fired.

The third of Kotter’s challenges is the rise of anger or cynicism should implementation of the change require the acquisition of new skills. I have seen this disparaging attitude work against the interests of this university, and it is the most pernicious of the impediments to change. A reluctance to cooperate is often manifested by a determination to wait out or slow down any new solution. I am especially appalled when this dynamic comes into play.

We are not in the manufacturing industry where failure to cooperate might impact the number or quality of widgets we produce. We have the power and responsibility to dramatically impact people’s lives.

The difference in the average income between a high school and a college graduate is more than 60 percent. At no time in history have American university graduates experienced such overwhelming competitive pressure. It’s our job to help them meet this challenge.

I visited India this past spring and saw for myself how they have made manifest Alvin Toffler’s prescriptions as laid out in his book, The Third Wave. Almost 30 years ago, Toffler wrote that high technology would be critical to the future development of nations like India. In 1980, he claimed that poor nations “should focus instead on one of the key industries of the emerging Third Wave: microelectronics.”
And that is exactly what India did in Bangalore. Bangalore is the result of an educational strategy that created two dozen engineering schools that graduate 260,000 engineers every year. By comparison, the number of engineers we graduate in the United States is closer to 60,000.

Thomas Friedman has documented the sea change in competition in his seminal book, *The World is Flat*. In one of his many, many examples, he reports that the number of our tax returns—that is U.S. tax returns—prepared in India rose from 25,000 to 400,000 in just two years, from 2003 to 2005. Heaven knows what that number would be today. 10 million? 50 million?

The point is that work that used to be done by entry-level American accountants — essentially our new graduates — has been outsourced. So our students have to offer more than just accounting skills. They need the soft skills, the communication skills, to serve the face-to-face needs of the client.

We have our work cut out for us but we cannot afford to fail these students. Join me as we strive to make this university an effective institution for the delivery of high-quality instruction and programming that ensures the retention and graduation of as many of the students who come through our door as we possibly can.

The “fierce urgency of now” is truly upon us.