Good morning! Welcome to the University Conference and to the 2010 – 2011 academic year.

Last year was one of the most difficult but also the most rewarding years of my tenure here. It was rewarding because I believe we celebrated the Centennial in a manner that befitted the proud institution that we represent. From Charter Day to the HBCU Conference and the dedication of the Centennial Chapel and Garden, we acknowledged the past and positioned ourselves for the future.

It was one of the most difficult years of my administration because of the budget cut of $3.5 million. 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.

Now, the burden has been placed on the students. Fortunately, this month, we have the opportunity through the Tom Joyner Foundation to mitigate this financial pressure with a contribution to the School of the Month Campaign. Throughout August, contributions to the Tom Joyner Morning Show will be directed to NCCU. With the goal of raising $250,000, every penny raised is allocated to student scholarships, based on financial need and merit.

Please acknowledge your solidarity with the students and give to this campaign.

In the theme of this conference, Promoting and Sustaining a Culture of Student Success, is the reference to “culture.” I’d like to talk to you about NCCU’s culture, because I believe it’s a critical determinant of student success. And given that NCCU is now judged by the Board of Trustees, the Board of Governors, and by state and federal officials for its four-year, five-year, and six-year graduation rates, our culture will determine whether NCCU continues to thrive as an institution of higher education.

If you don’t believe me about the pivotal role of organizational culture, you need only recall the spectacular collapse of the corporate merger of Daimler and Chrysler. Daimler lost billions of dollars and Chrysler filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Why? Analysts attribute it to the failure to acknowledge and manage the clash of cultures between the two car companies. Business leaders consistently underestimate the awesome power of corporate culture to sabotage plans that make perfect sense on paper.

It’s estimated that more than two-thirds of corporate mergers fail and in most cases, the blame lies in the inability of the individual organizations to change how they do things. The culture of any longstanding organization is entrenched. It’s pervasive and persistent.

Business writer Debra Thorsen describes corporate culture as rooted in shared values, private conversations, unspoken rules, beliefs and attitudes. Mood, idiosyncratic standards, interpersonal habits, and worldviews shape how we behave here at NCCU more than we know. And in large organizations like ours, the culture may vary from college to college, or even department to department.

Would your private thoughts, deeds, and conversations about the workplace stand the test of public scrutiny? Make no mistake. They certainly impact the way you do your job. NCCU’s culture is difficult to evaluate because it’s hard to elucidate.

But I have to believe it can change! Don’t indulge comments and behaviors that are not in the best interests of the students or the university. We need all of the positive, can-do energy we can muster!

Since I arrived, it has been my goal to shift the culture of NCCU to one that is more completely centered on student success. Most of us are already on board; too many are not.
Most of us chose to work at NCCU because of its mission. I commend you for your commitment, passion and patience as you endeavor to be agents of change.

To the outside world, NCCU proudly serves as a beacon of hope and opportunity, as well as a cultural and economic resource to our community. But on the inside, for a minority of us, personal agendas can supersede the needs of the students or the university.

We could plaster this campus with signs that say we’re committed to quality service, but that won’t change their hearts and minds. There are some faculty and staff members who use the students to battle with each other, as if they were a dysfunctional family. Mom’s talking trash about Dad. Dad says she’s crazy; don’t listen to her! Meanwhile, the students are learning what it is to be self-centered and unprofessional.

To those select few among us who can’t bring themselves to answer the most basic questions from their students with the same courtesy and respect you would answer to Saint Peter, I implore you, please go work for another university.

Find a university where the students arrive with all the skills they need to be successful in this life; where they just need the credential; where they’re motivated and disciplined; and they already know as much about your subject area as you do.

Then, once you find that university, come and recruit me!

I refuse to entertain the complaint, “If we only had different students.” These are the students we have. Having personally reviewed the admissions files of many of them, I am convinced that they possess the intellectual capacity to succeed at NCCU. And if we’ve enrolled them, then we must be fully committed to their success.

To my colleagues who are agents of change, if you know coworkers who are not serving the students’ interests, model student-first, quality service. Mentor them in ways they might do their jobs better, and if all else fails, help them to leave.

And to support you in your quality service to students, the NCCU management team and I will work to make faculty contribution to student success a key factor in post-tenure review.

We need to reward faculty who do an excellent job of mentoring students. We need to base promotion, in part, on five-year rates of student success, or the percentage of students who gain certification in their particular field.

In this regard, I’d like to acknowledge Dean Raymond Pierce and the Law School’s continuing excellence. The Law School’s national bar passage rate for first-time takers is 87 percent, and it was ranked as the No. 1 Best Value Law School in the country by the National Jurist magazine for the second year in a row.

The emphasis of faculty evaluation must be on student learning first, research second. For faculty, it’s easy to measure your impact on student success.

- Passage rates in the context of student evaluations
- State or national certification results
- Entry to graduate programs, and
- Post-graduate employment

These statistics tell the story of faculty effectiveness. And for you to be successful in the 21st Century classroom, the administration must do its part and invest in developing your teaching skills. We’ve begun to engage School of Education personnel to assist you in addressing learning styles, lesson plans, and syllabi through the formation of Faculty Learning Communities. We want to help you develop strategies to engage your students, especially with regard to the use of technology.
I know the vast majority of you are doing a great job. The nation knows you are doing a great job. The Southern Regional Education Board or SREB published a study in April in which they could find only 15 bachelor’s- and master’s-level universities across the country that presented a six-year graduation rate greater than 45 percent, with a profile like ours — low-wealth students with a median SAT less than 1050. NCCU was one of those 15.

I was thrilled and grateful to you for this acknowledgment. But here’s my reality check. Our four-year graduation rate in 2008 was 18 percent. Five-year? 38 percent. And the six-year rate was 48 percent. Despite our comparative success, how can anyone be satisfied with a graduation rate of one in two?

Yes, if we’ve enrolled them, we must be fully committed to their success, but not at the cost of lowered standards and expectations. Why is it that we allow students to progress beyond 18 credit hours with only a 1.5 GPA? It isn’t until the beginning of their junior level, when the coursework becomes more difficult, that we require them to post a 2.0.

This sets up the situation where students must take or retake more credit hours than required for their degree, to mathematically raise their GPA. We let them get into such a hole; they’d have to post straight A’s to dig themselves out! And then, when they attempt more than 140 hours, they are taxed with a 50 percent tuition surcharge.

This isn’t quality service. This seems disingenuous, except that NCCU really doesn’t benefit. These are the students who cost us enormously in terms of instructional and administrative time and attention that could be better used helping those with greater academic commitment.

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, nearly half of those students classified as freshmen, with less than or equal to 39 credit hours, posted a GPA below 2.0. Given our current sliding scale, most are academically eligible to return, but they’re already struggling.

The research is clear; we get what we expect. We get what we expect! With nearly half of our freshmen sitting at less than a 2.0, our expectations are too low.

Once we establish the expectation, 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, how is it that over the last two years, there were more than 100 students on their fourth, fifth, sixth, even seventh suspension?

If we dismiss them for a semester, we need to impose requirements for reinstatement such as the completion of community college coursework with a grade of C or better. And we have to mean what we say!

Access without success is hollow. Thankfully, as the SREB report spells out to a national audience, we’ve had our successes too. I would be remiss if I didn’t talk about what we do very right and offer a shout-out to those responsible for the good-news side of the ledger.

Student success is our highest priority and we are making progress in realigning our budget accordingly. Under the capable leadership of Dean Bernice Duffy Johnson, we allocated $1.2 million to transform our University College. This year, we’ll add another $300,000 to support academic advising for juniors and seniors. It is now a hub of academic support services for freshmen and sophomores.

The students are subject to intrusive, weekly advising and mentoring sessions that entail:

- Tutorials
- Weekly writing assignments
- Progress reviews, and
- Goal setting and academic planning.
I have already reported to you that after the first year of this program, our freshman-to-sophomore retention rate increased from 68 to 77 percent.

But you should know that under our current academic policies, 80 percent of last year’s freshmen are academically eligible to return this fall. Dean Johnson’s team is calling all of them to offer whatever assistance we can to ensure the successful start of their sophomore year.

I look forward to learning the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate for 2010 and also, the statistic for our sophomore-to-junior transition.

I don’t have to tell you that among African-Americans, the female to male ratio of higher education enrollment is 63 to 37 percent. We’re obviously losing our black males further back in the pipeline, which is a whole other conversation. But we’re not connecting with those who have made it to the university, even a black university like ours. Of the 2003 freshman class, about 9 percent of the African-American males graduated in four years as compared to 23 percent of black women students.

Research indicates that active engagement in college impacts retention regardless of the cultural context – black or white. Under the leadership of Vice Chancellor Kevin Rome in Student Affairs, we have two pilot projects in the works directed to African-American males.

The Centennial Scholars program invites incoming black male freshmen to apply, who are also Pell Grant-eligible. 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. Furthermore, they lived together in the same residence hall.

Student Affairs staff are leveraging peer pressure and group dynamics to achieve student success. In addition to the academic tutoring they receive at University College, these students are monitored and mentored for one hour a week by Kent Williams and Jason Dorsette.

Eighty-four percent of this first cohort was retained from first to second semester and we look forward to seeing how many return for sophomore year. Their average GPA for the year was quite promising: 2.78.

This fall, we’ll offer 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 assist 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 well-being. It can be overwhelming. We’re quite hopeful that these two programs will have a significant impact on retention and graduation rates among our black males.

Our success in addressing the needs of our students is in direct proportion to our strength of will and willingness to do things differently. If that will and willingness is in place, ask yourselves whether it’s clearly reflected in your investments of time, energy and resources.

Are there distractions, bureaucracy or cultural issues in the way? We’re all in this together. The shift in culture must be university-wide — from the Chancellor’s Office to the part-time employee in Facilities
If student success is the value we espouse, it must be put into practice all over campus and in every aspect of our operations.

I’ve asked all my direct reports to frame their goals and objectives for the coming year with consideration to the overarching imperative of student success. And at our freshman convocation, I’ll remind the students their destination must be graduation. If it isn’t, they need to stop wasting their parents’ money and our time, and leave now.

People deliver on what they are held accountable for. At NCCU, the expectation is set and the accountability is in place. Everyone will be judged, to some extent, by our contributions to the goal of student success.

That includes me. Our Board of Trustees and the Board of Governors will hold me accountable to reach the goals of 80 percent first-to-second-year retention, and a six-year graduation rate of 53 percent, by 2012.

Wherever you work on campus, you have a role to play in creating and sustaining a culture of student success. Disrespectful or negative comments, a lack of responsiveness, or failure to maintain the campus as a clean, safe environment in which to work and live could contribute to student disaffection with the university, and ultimate withdrawal.

At NCCU, quality service must be part of everyone’s job evaluation. To assist in this effort, we have encouraged our Student Government Association to pivot away from planning activities, to advocating for students. Their new mission is to make the administration aware of student needs as well as their dissatisfaction when quality service practices fall below expectations.

If members of our staff treat students poorly, if a professor makes inappropriate comments, we need to know about it. Without exception, we must adopt a student-first culture.

Even our alumni are called to account. Here, I would like to acknowledge the good work done by our Director of Alumni Affairs, Anita Walton. The SREB report stated, (quote) “[NCCU] Alumni serve on advisory committees, speak to classes, are involved in student activities, provide part-time jobs, and connect students with community service opportunities. They serve as role models for degree completion — the clear sign of success for both the university and its students.” (end-quote)

To summarize, we are determined to:

ONE
Set and clearly communicate high expectations for students, faculty and the administration with the singular goal of graduation.

TWO
Invest strategically, based on the best research available, in intrusive advising, monitoring and mentorship and in professional development so that faculty might approach teaching in a manner that produces better student performance.

THREE
Promote and sustain a culture of student success through the imposition and enforcement of accountability. Beginning at the management level, we will hold our administrators’ feet to the fire to ensure that they do their jobs in allocating resources and enforcing standards of performance according to the mission of student success.
We will hold students accountable for their progress through contracts, writing samples, early warning and mid-term reports. We are determined to set higher expectations for academic performance and adhere to them ourselves.

We’ll hold faculty accountable through measures of student success and student evaluations. And we’ll evaluate staff on the basis of their quality service, and help them to leave when it’s not in place.

See your role as an activist staff person, teacher or administrator and by that I mean, advocate for quality service for these students. Serve as an agent of change and target the issues that impede learning, retention and graduation.

Our university bureaucracy can overwhelm our students. However, I believe we’re on the path to change in the right direction. I’d like to read to you from an email I received last week about the service one of our students received in Associate Vice Chancellor Sharon Oliver’s Financial Aid Office.

It reads in part, “I would like to say that the financial aid office has been most outstanding in assisting me with all my financial aid issues and concerns. Everyone is helpful, attentive with a smile. I hope this message reaches the right hands because the services I have received have been outstanding and especially Ms. Annette Johnson.”

More than 12,000 new first-time freshmen applied for admission this fall. We admitted more than 4,500 and we expect to yield 1,400. We serve about 8,500 students in total — 75 percent undergraduates, 25 percent graduate and professional students.

And a disproportionate number are low-wealth. Sixty-five percent of the 2009–2010 freshmen class was Pell grant eligible; 40 percent were first-generation college students; 85 percent of our undergraduates are black.

This is a service-intensive student body. But these are the students we have and having enrolled them, we must fully commit to their success.

It was Alex Haley who wrote, (quote) “Either you deal with what is the reality, or you can be sure that the reality is going to deal with you.”

Thank you for all that you do for NCCU and welcome to the new academic year.