“The end of education is to know God and the laws and purposes of His Universe, and to reconcile one’s life with these laws. The first aim of a good college is not to teach books, but the meaning and purpose of life. Hard study and the learning of books are only a means to this end. We develop power and courage and determination and we go out to achieve truth, wisdom and justice. If we do not come to this, the cost of schooling is wasted.”

By Robert Malone, President, Branch Normal College (1922-1928)

Thank you for those kind introductory remarks.

I bring you greetings from the students, faculty and staff of America’s oldest public liberal arts college, founded for the education of African Americans more than 100 years ago.

Our highest priority is to create a culture of student success; a culture characterized by high levels of learning, retention and graduation.

It has been an honor to serve as Chancellor of the type of institution that helped me become the person, the professional and the servant leader that I am today.

While it is an honor, in all candor, I must acknowledge that it is one of the most challenging assignments of my 43-year career in higher education.

Comparatively speaking, I have had the opportunity to serve at some of America’s better-resourced institutions.

Many of the daily issues with which I have to contend at North Carolina Central University were not even on the radar screen at Earlham College, the University of Michigan or Indiana University.

I say that not as a back door way of complaining, but simply to acknowledge the differences in the context in which leadership takes place at many HBCUs and PWIs.
I am truly in awe of the men and women who have served our HBCUs for decades.

Although I may have had the opportunity to serve at better-resourced institutions, I have never been affiliated with a place that provided higher levels of personal and professional satisfaction.

There is nothing — absolutely, unequivocally nothing more rewarding than to see so many people who look like me, and who come from backgrounds similar to mine, at commencement at North Carolina Central University.

My heart is simply flooded with joy when I present young people from Halifax, Johnston or Warren County — some of North Carolina’s poorest counties — with a degree, in the presence of their families.

The words that I shared with you upon taking the podium are ones that my classmates and I were required to memorize in our Freshman Studies class at Arkansas’ Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College, now the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff.

Not only were we required to commit the college’s philosophy to memory, we were also expected to live our lives accordingly.

I shared those words with you this evening as a way of honoring and acknowledging the institution that took me just as I was, with an ACT score of 4 and no money.

Three years later, AM &N College graduated a confident young man with a degree in agronomy and chemistry, who was able to compete successfully at Indiana University and the Teacher College of Columbia University with graduate students from some of the best colleges and universities in the nation.

The institution that did that for me wasn’t one of Arkansas’ segregated white universities, but a poorly resourced, 1890 Land Grant institution founded for the education of Negroes.

I shall never forget my academic advisor, Mrs. Gladys McKindra Smith, who said to me on that hot July day, in an un-air conditioned auditorium,

“Mr. Nelms, your scores are sort of low, but, if you follow this schedule, you’ll be alright.”

She handed me a schedule that included remedial English and remedial math.
I’d never completed a course in statistics and didn’t know about the mean, mode, median, standard deviation or multiple regression analysis of anything.

I just followed Ms. Smith’s advice, because she and I both knew that the ACT wasn’t a measure of my intellect, motivation, drive, work ethic or persistence.

Mrs. Shannon, my university calculus professor, convinced me that I could perform well in her class and that the slide rule was just another tool.

Despite never having had high school chemistry, Dr. Paul Smith made biochemistry more than a bunch of formulas.

The men and women at Arkansas AM&N College told me what I could do, not what I couldn’t do.

They refused to let me use segregation as an excuse for not becoming what I could become.

With that experience, every day I live I do two things:

1. I do my very best to show students, faculty, staff and the parents of our students the respect and care that was shown to me during my tenure at AM&N College.

2. I follow my Mama’s advice to do the best that I can. At the end of the day, I go home knowing that I did the best that I could to advance the mission of my university.

This evening, I want to share briefly with you what I believe to be the prerequisites for creating and sustaining a culture of excellence at America’s historically black colleges.

I wanted to bring the best practices that I’d learned at those other institutions to an HBCU, to lift its performance and reputation, not to make it white — to make it excellent.

Excellence has no color, no gender, no geography or racial ethnicity.

But before I do that, let me encourage you to pick up a copy of my Call to Action to strengthen the HBCU sector.

It is the most tangible product of NCCU’s Centennial Symposium held one year ago this month.

I was grateful for the attendance of 500 colleagues, some of whom are in this room, who helped us begin the discussion about the future of HBCUs.

I won’t reiterate to you the recommendations in that report but rather,

I would like to focus on the prerequisites that I believe HBCU leadership must strive to achieve to ensure that HBCUs thrive and compete successfully.
Jim Collins, the author of the very popular book, *Good to Great*, is quoted as saying, “Good is the enemy of great.”

For me, the first prerequisite is setting expectations that are high, clear and relentless.

HBCUs should be comparing themselves with the best colleges and universities in the country because gone for good are the days in which we competed simply amongst ourselves.

The research is clear; we get what we expect.

And because we get what we expect, we need to raise our expectations!

At NCCU, this means we had to change our academic progression policy.

In the past, like many institutions, we allowed students to progress with less than a 2.0 grade point average until they reach the completion of a certain number of credit hours.

That’s no longer the case.

And if we dismiss students for a semester, and we have — hundreds of them — we impose requirements for their reinstatement.

For example, they may be asked to complete community college coursework with a grade of C or better.

We want our students to know they need to graduate, not just attend the university.

If they don’t intend to graduate, they need to stop wasting their parents’ money and our time, energy and resources.

But the increase in expectations doesn’t start and end with the students.

It’s wholesale.

As we have dismissed students for lagging in academic performance, there has been increased pressure on admissions to recruit more and better-prepared students.

The Division of Financial Affairs has had to become more diligent in areas such as procuring accounts receivable to help make up the difference in enrollment revenue.

If too many students are failing certain courses, faculty have had to reconsider how they’re teaching and mentoring them.
And in case students are leaving because they’re not treated with respect, staff all across campus have been engaged in required customer service training.

Wholesale change like this is difficult without the second prerequisite, which is transformational leadership and accountability.

Universities are not rental cars — you don’t just take them for a spin, never changing the oil or even looking under the hood.

HBCUs must recruit and appoint leaders who inspire change rather than preside over the status quo.

Too many of our presidents and chancellors across an array of institutions seem uncomfortable with making people uncomfortable.

So they don’t lead.

Drawing on the writings of James MacGregor Burns and Bernard Bass, transformational leaders seek to change both the head and the heart of their employees.

They succeed in this only to the extent they successfully communicate a compelling vision and implement a paradigm shift,

like a tidal wave that alters employees’ perceptions, expectations, hopes and dreams.

To do so, leaders must take risks and challenge assumptions.

You must lead by example and coach and mentor team members who often have had very little formal management training.

Hire good people, but then listen to their ideas.

Two, five, ten heads are better than one, but the final decision cannot be delegated.

Passion, energy and enthusiasm can’t be delegated either, and must be in constant and ready supply.

Then, the leaders must be held accountable for their highest priority — retaining students and graduating them

with a competitive credential that enables satisfying careers.

I remind my university colleagues of the Harold Geneen quotation:
“It is an immutable law in business that words are words, explanations are explanations, promises are promises – but only performance is reality.” (End-quote)

The third prerequisite is to invest strategically in activities that advance the institution.

Everything is important but not everything is of equal importance.

A transformational leader must make values-centered decisions that are data-driven.

Faced with a significant budget cut, slashing across the board may be the path of least resistance but it is also the path to mediocrity.

At NCCU, we’ve allocated $1.5 million to transform our University College into a hub of academic support services for freshman through to senior year.

This investment is in keeping with our highest priority and that is the retention and graduation of our students.

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

- Tutorials
- Weekly writing assignments
- Progress reviews, and
- Goal setting and academic planning.

Now, we’re in the process of program assessment that must be qualitatively and quantitatively robust.

We need to either justify or nullify parts or the whole of the program.

The fourth prerequisite is to conduct the affairs of our universities with integrity and transparency.

Academic and fiscal integrity are critical to institutional credibility.

Without it, you cannot attract quality students, faculty, staff or investments.

You’ve heard the phrase “Ignorance of the law is no excuse.”

Well, ignorance of the policies, procedures or practices at your university is no excuse either.

If you don’t know how something works, find out.
When I arrived at NCCU, I instituted several audits across campus in those areas in which I was given reason to believe there was cause for concern.

In so doing, I invited public scrutiny of private deeds.

And some of those deeds have resulted in embarrassing stories in the press.

But I promise you, the reporting would have been much worse if an outside agency had made the discoveries.

Had I not taken the risk in lifting up the corner of the rug to see what was hiding there, I would have wasted my time and energy cleaning around the edges.

And I’d never have my house in order.

In one instance, I found two IT staff who were downloading pirated software, music, movies and other material on university computers and servers.

They were terminated, and then the CIO was terminated too.

Ignorance is no excuse. You must know what’s going on in your own department.

The fifth prerequisite for success is the appointment of trustees who possess the requisite values and commitment.

They must be willing to invest personally in the mission of the university.

We must resist the temptation to recommend and appoint trustees who are inclined to offer $1 million in advice and $500 of their personal resources.

We need the direct and indirect investments from our trustees that result from influence and affluence.

I like to quote my friend Marybeth Gasman when she says trustees must “Give, get or get off.”

The sixth and final prerequisite is the delivery of high quality and user-friendly customer service.

There was a time when what many HBCUs lacked in fiscal resources and facilities was compensated for by an intense culture of caring.

That has been lost along the way.

Somewhere along the line, it seems like we forgot our most important reason for being here and that is to take students from where they are to where they need to be.

We stopped answering the phone. We stopped treating students as if they were our own.
We started taking them for granted.

Upon arriving at NCCU and hearing the stories about our customer service, I immediately established the Quality Service Initiative.

Through this initiative, we are communicating high expectations to our staff and providing training.

And we have incorporated quality service as part of the criteria for annual performance reviews too.

We hold people accountable.

I take no joy in this, but we have helped a lot of people embark on new careers someplace else.

More than a dozen people in key leadership roles have been removed from office.

Terminations have been made all across the spectrum of employment at NCCU; regardless of the employment safeguards afforded to them by the state.

Executives, administrators, faculty and support workers have been dismissed.

Some have sued us.

And some of those lawsuits have been successful because we didn’t have the documentation in place.

But it was worth it, because the tide is turning.

The message is getting out there that the status quo is not an option.

In closing, I would like to say this.

While we honor our historic significance, we cannot fixate on this.

We have to compete — and not just with each other.

I am convinced that the future of HBCUs will be determined by our competitiveness, relevance and responsiveness.

To thrive, we must make hard choices and lead with passion, energy and commitment, or else we will fade away into the annals of history.

And I for one believe that would be a tragic loss to this country and to a community still struggling to escape poverty.
But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Few of us seriously believed that non-violent protest would break the back of Jim Crow.

No one of us predicted the election of a black president in 2008.

And no one predicted that Facebook and twitter would do more to advance the cause of democracy in the Middle East

than all the blood and treasure this country has sacrificed in the last 10 years.

I’d like to leave you with a quote by Harvard’s John Kotter,

“Effective leaders help others to understand the necessity of change and to accept a common vision of the desired outcome.”