2012 USA Funds Symposium
February 24, 2012, 8:30 a.m.
Charlie Nelms, Chancellor,
North Carolina Central University
Closing Address
Sustainability: Embracing new directions
for capacity building and student success

Thank you for those kind introductory remarks.

Good morning!

I bring you greetings from the students, faculty and staff of North Carolina Central University, America’s oldest public liberal arts college for the education of African-Americans, founded 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 44-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 I have to contend with 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.

Forty-six years ago this past summer, I enrolled at an HBCU, Arkansas’ Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College, now the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff.

Arkansas AM&N was a poorly resourced, 1890 Land Grant institution founded for the education of Negroes.

I shall never forget my academic advisor, Mrs. Gladys McKindra Smith.

On a July day, in an auditorium that was about 100 degrees, she said, “Mr. Nelms, your scores are sort of low, but if you follow this schedule, you'll be alright.”

She handed me a plan that included remedial English and remedial math.

Luckily for me, Mrs. Smith knew that my ACT score of 4 wasn’t a measure of my intellect, motivation, drive, work ethic or persistence.

The faculty 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 failing to fulfill my potential.

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 direction and 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.

As we gather this morning, 40 states have cut back on higher education.

The North Carolina General Assembly allowed a surtax to expire on corporate and individual income.

Then they made significant cuts to employment, benefits and education.

With the 2011 budget, $414 million was cut from the public University of North Carolina system’s budget.

There has been a constant siphoning of operating dollars.
My university has lost $50 million in budget cuts and permanent reversions since I took office in 2007.

This year, we’ve streamlined course offerings and reviewed operating expenses to identify $2 million in savings over a four-year period, for reinvestment in our highest priority — the retention and graduation of students.

But even with these efficiencies and an increase in tuition beginning this fall, we’re trying to manage with $13 million less than we had in 2010.

At NCCU, 65 percent of our budget revenue comes from the state.

The 14 percent cut we shouldered had a significantly greater impact on us than on those campuses with huge endowments and much smaller fractions of their funding based on taxpayer support and tuition receipts.

While we were busy making cuts to public education, others around the world were investing in their future prosperity.

As we gather here today, the United States has fallen to 16th place in the 2011 OECD survey of 36 modern nations.

This is the ranking of per capita college graduates between the ages of 25 and 34.

In 2010, we were 12th.

President Barack Obama has called for an increase of 20 percentage points in our graduation rate in order to retake the lead — the American Graduation Initiative.

Now 20 points won’t be good enough to overtake first place South Korea.

65 percent of South Korean young adults earned a degree.

And a much higher proportion of them entered careers in the sciences.

As we gather here today, Congress has yet to decide what to do with President George W. Bush’s tax cuts.

Congress is arguing over the difference between the Bush tax rate of 35 percent and the nearly 40 percent rate for the highest income earners established under President Bill Clinton.

But it was President Ronald Reagan who started the snowball rolling toward breathtaking income inequality.
He cut the highest personal income tax rate from 70 percent to 28 percent.

Now, as we gather here today, the richest 1 percent of Americans holds more than one-third of the nation’s wealth.

The richest 20 percent of Americans own more than 85 percent of the nation’s wealth, and the poorest 40 percent have no marketable assets.

According to Julia Isaacs of The Brookings Institution, 42 percent of poor children become poor adults and 39 percent of rich children become rich adults.

Only 6 percent prove the rags to riches story that is supposed to be this country’s birthright.

Sustaining them at the top and trapping them at the bottom is a six-fold difference in college degree attainment — 54 percent at the top and 9 percent in the bottom quartile of income.

It is a legacy passed from parent to child.

There is no better predictor of children’s academic achievement than parental academic achievement.

And there is no better predictor of personal financial success than educational success.

Education is now and has always been the engine of opportunity.

Stanford University’s Sean Reardon found the gap between rich and poor children’s reading and math scores is nearly twice the achievement gap between black and white children.

Fifty years ago, the black-white gap was one-and-a-half to two times the size of the rich-poor divide.

As we gather here this morning, President Barack Obama’s speech to his University of Michigan audience is ringing in our ears, “we can’t just keep on subsidizing skyrocketing tuition.”

Then he suggested rewarding institutions that keep their tuition low but still manage to graduate high numbers of Pell-eligible students.

This is the conundrum I face every day.

The President’s budget proposal to infuse $150 million more for the Federal College Work Study Program is welcome news, as is holding the Stafford Loan interest to 3.4 percent and increasing the Pell grant to $5,635.
We also appreciate the protection of Title III and Title V funding.

I know I speak for everyone here when I say we certainly hope that these proposals are successful.

Depending on the result of the Michigan primary on Tuesday, the President may be facing a candidate who doesn’t believe in public education at all.

For him, it’s an article of faith.

Somehow it seems appropriate to me to begin the body of my remarks with a passage from Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

Alice said to the Cheshire cat, “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where —’ said Alice.

Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.”

We all have to decide, as institutions of higher education, where we want to go.

What is the single most important thing we are striving to achieve?

And once you know that, let all other decisions flow from that single-minded resolution.

At NCCU, we’ve decided our one thing — our highest priority — is student success.

At first, we defined it narrowly to mean increasing our retention and graduation rates.

Now the concept has expanded to include graduating students with a competitive skill set that leads to their successful entry into the workforce.

With a destination clearly in focus, every aspect of our operation, from the degree programs we offer to the choice of efficiencies we make in facilities services, must be aligned with that goal.

Former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.”

Don’t get me wrong: I deplore the budget cuts.

But I have no hesitation in using them to facilitate the realignment of my institution.
They have served to establish the indisputable reality that something has to give.

One of the most important leadership lessons that I’ve learned is this — while everything is important, not everything is of equal importance.

Faced with a 14 percent budget cut, slashing across the board is the path of least resistance but it is also the path to mediocrity.

We needed to cut strategically to protect and even enhance activities that truly advance student success.

To overcome the inevitable resistance to change, irrespective of your goal, you must base your decisions on objective data.

We decided which degree programs to eliminate, consolidate or expand on the basis of an analysis of dozens of statistical and objective indices.

The most important were these:

- Enrollment
- Retention and graduation rates
- Post-graduate placement
- Undergraduate and graduate research opportunities and grants
- Program accreditations and commendations
- And finally, cost.

I mention cost last because if all of the other indices are in order, we’ll find the money.

Sadly, we have several programs for which these indices are not in place.

Unless the underachieving program serves the development of a critical skill set, it will be cut.

If it is somehow essential, we will rebuild it centered on students’ needs.

For example, in a society with a growing Hispanic population, we can’t afford not to offer Spanish.

So we will deconstruct, reconstruct and invest in that program to ensure that it meets our expectations for excellence.

If student success is your primary goal, then decisions about which faculty will stay and which faculty will go will be driven by their ability as teachers.
We are analyzing data to assess faculty impact on the rates of failure, withdrawal or incomplete grades and we intend to include these data among other objective measures in evaluating faculty performance.

We are also investing in faculty professional development.

The effect of faculty learning communities, in which education experts facilitate group discussions about novel approaches to teaching, has been very encouraging.

The needs of our students must drive the choice of the tools and techniques we use in the classroom.

Faculty members may be masters of their content, but they can’t serve simply as sources of information.

Students already have millions of sources of information at their fingertips.

Faculty add value to the extent that they facilitate learning, analysis, innovation and critical thinking.

If students are consistently failing a gateway course in mathematics, the students are not the problem.

The problem is in the structure, implementation and pedagogy of the course.

It's not a matter of student deficiency.

We cannot reach our retention and graduation goals by always trying to “fix the student,” while leaving everything and everyone else intact.

[PAUSE]

Over the past decade, we’ve launched a dozen initiatives to enhance student engagement across the divisions of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

Unfortunately, we’ve not yet achieved the level of synergy we need to sustain student success.

Student success is a comprehensive, long-term goal requiring comprehensive, long-term, sustainable effort.

Let me site an example of a very successful initiative that we’ve implemented at NCCU.

We call it the Centennial Scholars program.
Students entering our Centennial Scholars program are in it for the duration of their matriculation.

385 African-American males participate in intrusive advising, mentoring, service learning and learning communities.

We engage these students in multiple supportive relationships and experiences.

So far, retention is more than 80 percent.

Notice that we’re combining a number of interventions.

I’m convinced there is no single, magic bullet.

[PAUSE]

Any gains in this program or any other may not be sustained if the institution as a whole has not embraced student success as the driving motivation for showing up each day.

This is the key to sustainability — complete and inclusive culture change.

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying the definition of insanity is “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

Our faculty and staff have to abandon long-held notions of student deficiencies and embrace the need for personal change.

To affect a culture, you need at least two things working for you: transformational leadership and accountability.

I have sought to recruit and appoint leaders who share my passion and who inspire change rather than preside over the status quo.

Leaders have to take risks and challenge assumptions.

In the past, too many of NCCU’s managers were uncomfortable with making people uncomfortable.

So they didn’t lead.

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.
Personnel changes 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 too, 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.

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 must successfully communicate a compelling vision that alters their colleagues’ perceptions and expectations but also gets them ‘fired up and ready to go.’

Passion, energy and enthusiasm can’t be delegated.

They must be in constant and ready supply.

At the end of the day, my leadership team, faculty and staff 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.”

In this business of changing a culture, you have to have a lot of patience because it doesn’t happen overnight.

It has taken me five years to build my administrative team, and they have been given the charge to realign their operations

so that everyone on staff is committed and contributing to student success.

What could stymie our progress more certainly than any other risk factor would be our failure to develop and deploy reliable measures of success.

Once again, it is objective measures that must be documented in the evaluation of program, faculty and staff performance.
Without statistically valid and reliable indices of student learning and success outcomes, there can be no accountability.

And with no accountability, there will be no change.

These student outcomes must be consistent with societal and market needs.

They are the foundation of successful fund raising proposals and the financial sustainability of your programs.

I wanted to bring the best practices that I’d learned at Earlham College, the University of Michigan and Indiana University to an HBCU, to lift its performance and reputation, not to make it white — to make it more excellent, relevant and responsive.

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

I have endeavored to set expectations that are high, clear and transparent.

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 among 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 when we dismiss students for a semester, we impose requirements for their reinstatement.

For example, they’re required to complete community college coursework with a grade of C or better.

It is our reverse transfer program.

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

But as I’m sure you have gathered, the increase in expectations doesn’t start and end with the students.
It’s wholesale.

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.

Although we still have a way to go, the CUPA-HR Southern Region Board selected our Quality Service Initiative team for the 2012 Excellence in HR Practices award.

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

We must hold everyone accountable from the chancellor to the custodian.

In closing, I would like to say this.

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

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 history.

I for one believe that would be a tragic loss to this country and to a community still struggling to escape poverty.

I believe we can make this work.

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.

President Lyndon B. Johnson said in a speech he gave to his University of Michigan audience with then-Governor George Romney in attendance, “Poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty.”