8-17-2006

UA3/9/5 Faculty-Staff Convocation

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Welcome, my friends, to our 2006 opening Convocation.

What an exhilarating time of year this is as we welcome new faculty and staff, greet new and long-time friends, and prepare to open a new academic year, particularly on one of the most energized and rapidly changing campuses in American higher education. Thank you for being here this morning. I personally consider this moment, which we take once a year, to be among the most important moments we share as a university community and a campus family. This family is, indeed, spread far and wide, particularly in the summer, with so many study abroad programs, research initiatives across the globe, and personal and professional travel which dominates our individual and collective agendas. Those far-flung endeavors are beginning to permeate our calendar throughout the year, especially as we further develop our new Winter Term. Today, however, we come together to visit, to communicate, and get an update on things that are currently on our minds. We are also here to reinforce our core values as an institution and to recommit ourselves to the transitions which define us, which are currently defining this campus, and the university transformation to which I, and I trust all of you, are dedicated.

I particularly want to wholeheartedly welcome our new faculty and staff. As you engage in your orientation activities this week, you will sense that you are now part of something very special. You are, indeed, part of an institution engaged in significant transitions. You will come to identify with and contribute to the transformation about which I will speak this morning and which is at the very core of our campus strategic planning process. We welcome the knowledge, experience, and ideas you bring from institutions across this nation and across the globe. We are hungry to incorporate your many capacities into the fabric and personality of WKU. We welcome you, your spouses, and your families to our community of scholars and professionals and to the broader community of Bowling Green and surrounding towns. We worked hard to get you here. You are crucial to WKU. We want you here for a long time.

The last time many of us were together was May 13 when we graduated a couple of thousand students and celebrated the end of the last academic year. Much has happened since then—some things wonderful, some things tragic. I could not possibly capture all of the things which have transpired since we were last together, but a few must be acknowledged for purposes of richly deserved recognition, or emotionally important closure.

Since last May, we have celebrated the continuing national and international dominance of our WKU Forensics Team. Again, sweeping all of the national and international debate competitions. We have celebrated the continuing national prominence of our School of Journalism and Broadcasting—this past year finishing fourth in the national rankings by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. If, by the way, it sounds like I talk about these two programs every year, you are right! This is not a broken record. This is sustained national prominence and it represents two academic initiatives which begin to validate our drive to become a leading American university. Congratulations to Pam Johnson and Judy Woodring and their colleagues and students. Keep up the good work.
If your discipline has national measures of success, or your students can find ways to compete nationally, then go for it. If I or Dr. Burch can help, let us know. Let me add your department or your students to my broken record. There are no bounds or limits to my energy when it comes to bragging about the success of our students or our faculty, staff, or alumni.

There are a couple of other recent examples where talented WKU students, led by visionary and dedicated faculty, performed well on the national stage. Congratulations to Leo Simpson and the students who make up our Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) organization. In only their second year of competing against most major universities in America, they finished second in the national SIFE Entrepreneurship Competition. What an example they set for all of us as we more and more become an entrepreneurial-driven university. The innovation and confidence which undergirds their entrepreneurial spirit is at the core of our university's transformation. It is terrific to see our students focused on free enterprise and watch them compete so well against colleges and universities of all descriptions. Congratulations also to Matt Dettman and our civil engineering students who finished eighth in the International Concrete Canoe competition. In six of the last seven years, the students in this program have finished in the top 10 in the nation in this rigorous academic exercise. Countless hours were spent preparing the scholarly papers, building and rebuilding the canoe for competition against the top engineering programs in America, and then having the product itself hold up against extreme conditions. Yes, it floats; and yes, our students excel both in the intellectual and physical dimensions of this curious competition.

And what a boost we received in May when we announced a $15 million gift from our friend and Bowling Green benefactor, Jerry Baker. His estate gift of a minimum of $11 million, plus his entire home, arboretum, art, and furniture collections will provide a marvelous intellectual and aesthetic amenity to future generations of WKU faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends. We will begin to host selective university events at the Baker House and Gardens over the next few years. The real beneficiaries of this wonderful gift, however, will be those who succeed us in WKU's promising future.

On the tragic side of the ledger, we ended the last academic year reeling from an arson-ignited fire in Cherry Hall which resulted in some $1.3 million of physical damage, and untold emotional hardship on several of our faculty in the humanities disciplines. This tragic loss of personal and campus property, however, is ending on a good note. The restoration of the physical space in Cherry Hall is nearly complete and the arsonists have been identified and arrested. The fear of unknown perpetrators has been replaced with the knowledge that the guilty parties were a few juveniles and one young adult who not only set this fire but several others throughout our broader community. Congratulations to Chief Deane and our campus police for their dedicated efforts and teamwork with local and state authorities in solving this crime and making the arrests. While these arsonists had no connection to the university, they have taught us a valuable lesson which will shape our future behavior related to campus and building security. Over the next few years, we will achieve a more effective balance of building security and convenient access to our campus facilities. A university by nature must be open and accessible to the faculty, staff, and students whose growth depends on it. We will find ways to ensure access for those who need it and deny access for those whose motives are contrary to the values which we hold dear as a campus family.

Finally, and most tragically, we lost a man who has helped guide this university for the last twelve years. We buried Cornelius Martin following a tragic accident earlier this summer. At the time of his death, Cornelius Martin was the only individual in WKU's history who had twice served as Chair of our Board of Regents. He was our Chair at the time of his death. He was instrumental in creating our strategic plan which was first introduced in 1998, and he was fundamentally engaged in
every assessment of our progress since then. He was far more than a person to whom I was personally accountable. He was a close personal friend to me and to many of us in this hall this morning. He was a man of vision, of character, and whose insights set the pace for everything we have been about as a campus community since my tenure in this position began nine years ago. Whether you knew him or not, you must know that we will miss him. We will, however, move on. In the name of experience and continuity and perhaps irony, the Board of Regents has elected Earl Fischer as the new Chair of our Board and Lois Gray as the Vice Chair. We are, indeed, fortunate to have such strong leadership guiding the policy-making functions of our governing Board.

Other continuing trends which have been sustained in recent months include another record applicant pool for undergraduate and graduate classes which begin next week. When all the numbers are in, we will again surpass 14,000 applicants for spots in our student population. Private support ended another year with record numbers. We passed $14 million in gift deposits for the first time in our history as we closed the fiscal year on June 30. We also recaptured positive growth trends in sponsored programs as our grants and contracts totals achieved a record of $31 million for the last academic year. Congratulations to Tom Hiles and our Development staff and to Phil Myers and our staff in Sponsored Programs. We also finished last year, not only as the fastest growing university across the Commonwealth, but also the most productive in terms of degree completions. WKU, with last year’s graduating class, showed a 21 percent increase over the previous year in the number of degrees awarded—far and away, the strongest number among Kentucky universities. WKU’s degree production has grown by 70 percent since 1998, higher than any other university in the Commonwealth. Yes, both quantity and quality are important. I will touch more on quality in a few minutes, but it is important that we set the pace in Kentucky and rise to the challenge. This state has demanded of the higher education community that we produce more college graduates, educate more Kentuckians, and put more skilled and credentialed individuals into our state’s work force.

We should also be proud that in May, WKU was crowned as the All Sports Champion in the Sun Belt Conference. An award which we have achieved three out of the last five years with close runner-up finishes of the other two. WKU’s athletic teams won seven out of sixteen conference championships during the last academic year. We also, by the way, had the best academic performance in graduation rate statistics among student athletes of any university in our conference. Our football team also had the best academic progress rate of any school in the Gateway Football Conference. Congratulations to the students in this program who work hard to represent us all in athletic competitions and to Wood Selig and our staff for their continuing efforts to ensure that our athletic programs are run in a dignified and successful manner, with sound financial and academic principles.

A moment ago, I mentioned what the state expects of us in terms of raw numbers production. My comments this morning would be incomplete if I did not acknowledge the nature of our publicness as a state university and an important agency of state government. While we intentionally and strategically control our own destiny as an institution, and we are operating in ways which often reflect an independent institution, we first and foremost are here to serve this Commonwealth and its people. While only 27 percent of our budget comes from the state, it is still a big number—$80.2 million to be exact. It would take a couple of billion dollars in private endowment to ensure that kind of revenue stream were we not a public university. We are proud of our publicness and our responsibility to be a good steward of this region even while our mission is rapidly changing in dramatic ways. The core of that mission is still to serve the broad populations of Kentucky with relevant degree programs, relevant applied research initiatives, and meaningful service across our region.
It is important that we take a moment to understand, however, that as a public institution, we are always engaged in the politics of state government. We work hard in Frankfort to help make things happen which enhance our campus and public higher education across the Commonwealth, and we work hard to try to defer or prevent legislation which is harmful to public higher education or to WKU. We have been rather successful in these regards for the last several years—often in ways which go beyond the appropriation process. When laws are passed or actions taken; and as a state agency, we comply.

We suffered a blow, however, at the very end of the legislative process late last spring when eight WKU capital projects were vetoed—four which we were financing ourselves and four of which the General Assembly had approved for state funding. We will, however, work with legislative and executive leadership to get these projects restored. That will happen in due course. In the meantime, we will be patient and do as much as we can with the accumulation of restricted revenues dedicated to these projects until state and agency bonds are finally approved.

Over the summer, we also continued to celebrate our Centennial both on and off campus. Last year at this Convocation, you heard David Lee describe the emerging plans of our Centennial. Themes of remembrance have been rolling through most of our campus events for the last several months. Many more will follow in the next few months. We will draw this 100th birthday celebration to a close on November 18 with a dedication of two permanent, physical tributes to our first century of service. First, the artful mosaic which is carefully being pieced together where the fountain will once again spout next to the Fine Arts Center, and secondly, the Centennial Mall which is in its third and final construction phase. It is located at the core of our campus near the Downing University Center and four of our residence halls. Both of these projects are birthday presents to ourselves and both will bring aesthetic value to this uniquely beautiful campus. My compliments to David Lee, Jayne Pelaski, and everyone serving on our Centennial Committee for a job well planned and well done.

As I transition now from the recent past to the near future, I want to start with the vision thing. In 1998, when we rolled out that first comprehensive, precise, and empirically measurable strategic plan, we penned a vision for this then complacent university to “become the best public comprehensive university in Kentucky and among the best in the nation.” Over the last nine years, there have been many changes—some dramatic, some subtle. We have, indeed, responded to the nomenclature of our Board of Regents which comes down to one word, “transformation.” The Board challenged me and all of us, then and now, to pursue and achieve a full and complete transformation. That pursuit is at the core of everything we do. Given our performance in recent years, it is the conclusion of those involved in our strategic planning process that the vision of 1998 is well in hand. Following the recent broad public distribution of our strategic plan update, and on the strength of a series of alumni group conversations, we have grown into the bold vision of becoming “a leading American university with international reach.” Those seven words now drive me and those who genuinely believe that this university is both poised and capable of achieving national prominence and incorporating an international context into the fabric of our curriculum and our influence. Those words do not suggest we will become “the” leading American university, nor do they suggest we will become internationally prominent. They do suggest we will achieve enough national distinction in enough areas to be recognized among our nations leading universities, and we will become engaged across the globe enough to document a legitimate international context in our teaching, research, and service.

Let’s talk for a moment about how we have moved from being something of regional importance to something of national prominence. It starts with an optimistic attitude; something about which I devoted most of my comments one-year ago on this occasion, and it is fueled by the entrepreneurial spirit which is permeating the actions which define us. Only those who risk going
too far will ever know how far they can go. We have grown comfortable with risk because we have seen the rewards. We have grown comfortable with boldness because we have tasted just enough national success to like its flavor. We have pushed the limits on pricing to create the capacity to compete. We have brought talent to our faculty, staff, and administration. I repeat what I said in the video which started our session this morning. Over half of our faculty have been at Western less than five years. Part of that is a natural evolution of a faculty which was hired in a massive growth period of the 1960s and early 1970s. Part of it is dramatic investments in academic quality which has created, over the last three years, a significant number of new faculty positions partly to keep pace with our growth and partly to support strategically important academic initiatives. This vision will also be achieved through thoughtful investment in academic programs which are within our power to control and through which national prominence can be achieved in a reasonable period of time.

Let me be clear. Our pursuit of national prominence, our desire to be a leading American university, is not based on institutional ego nor is it just for achievement’s sake. Rather, it is largely energized through a growing institutional capacity and firm belief that quality, on a national scale, positions us to better serve the Commonwealth to which we are dedicated. Everything which brings clarity to this vision is intertwined and interrelated: the attitude, the strategic plan, the financial resources, the momentum of a growing enrollment, the physical rebuilding of our campus, the evolving mission of applied research and its correlation with the economic development of our region, and, the emerging themes of citizenship, leadership, and engagement which are shaping Western’s experience on the heels of our recent re-accreditation process.

Before getting into the strategic priorities that will feed this transformation and chase that vision, I want to focus just a moment on the cold hard reality of our campus budget. After all, how we spend our money largely defines what we shall become. With the exception of our attitude and our institutional self-esteem, nothing has been transformed more at WKU than our financial profile. In nine years, we have more than doubled our institutional budget from some $130 million when our strategic plan was written to nearly $300 million as we embark on this new academic year. Only a few years ago, state appropriations were our dominate revenue stream, the source of funds on which we were most dependent. Today, we receive $110 million from tuition and $80 million from the state. We have moved from being dependent upon economic fluctuations of the state budget, to a place where we are more in control of our own destiny, with a much more diversified economic profile than at any time in our history. A few years ago, private gifts and sponsored programs were inconsequential in the annual campus budget. Today, private gift support and grants and contracts are cornerstones of our financial strength—and both hit record numbers this past year. We have challenged those who manage our financial affairs and auxiliary programs to create good business practices that allow a higher quality of life on our campus and generate revenue to support our bold plans and provide a financial enhancement to the campus rather than a financial drain on our precious resources. Budget redirection, priority funding, and plowing profits back into campus enhancements suggest that the corporate nature of this complex organization is being operated with sound business acumen. My compliments to Ann Mead, our Chief Financial Officer, and her staff, and John Osborne, our Associate Vice President for Campus Services, and his staff for their good work with our financial operations, our auxiliaries, and our physical plant operations.

Another growth area in the campus budget has been our success in Washington, D.C. As we move into our second century, we find ourselves enjoying strong relationships with our Federal Congressional and Senate delegations. Our annual direct appropriations in the federal budget are now consistently in the $15 million range. For this, I am grateful to our deans and to the faculty
who continue to provide insightful and relevant research and service proposals which match well the priorities of our leaders in Washington. Robbin Taylor, with great support from Provost Barbara Burch, the deans, and Vice President Gene Tice, and their staffs, continues to guide and monitor our state and federal governmental relations with prudence and productivity.

With regard to our state appropriations, I am pleased to say that we weathered the budget cuts that hindered us for nearly five years—between 2000-2005. The budget approved for the 2006-2008 state biennium is progressive for higher education. While it is lean for the coming fiscal year, it improves significantly in fiscal year 2007-2008. In spite of the eight projects which were vetoed at the end of the most recent state budget process, we were fortunate to get a $35 million College of Education building funded. Architects have been hired and the site selection process and the architectural design phase for that building are at hand. Because of limited state funds, however, in the coming fiscal year, and because the ability or the desire to mandate double digit tuition increases has passed, we find ourselves with limited capacity this academic year. The significant strides we’ve made in the recent years with salaries and benefits allowed two things to occur this year. We are able to weather a breather on campus investments in benefit packages, and we were able to hold constant employee contributions to our self-funded health insurance program. Unfortunately, our average compensation increase is only 3 percent this year which is significantly less than that which we have enjoyed for the last several years. It is my intent, however, to do better next year, and I will challenge the Budget Council to work toward that end as well.

With $5.8 million in new state funding for 07-08 and with a market sensitive tuition structure, we will also be able to invest in strategic priorities. We will continue to ensure that our enrollment management program is well funded. We will invest additional resources in our minority recruitment programs. We will focus on significant demographic shifts in the Elizabethtown/Hardin County area. We will challenge the Division of Extended Learning and Outreach (DELO) to grow our extended campuses and our distance learning populations. By the way, let me compliment Don Swoboda and our DELO team for the great job they are doing in growing these populations, expanding our asynchronous curricula, and successfully implementing a Winter Term which exceeded all expectations. DELO is operating in a financially independent manner and producing resources which will increasingly support cross-campus initiatives.

Enrollment—traditional and nontraditional, campus or extended campus, on-site or on-line—is and always will be the life blood of this or any other university. As I do every year, I implore you to be thoughtful about recruiting students and always exert our best efforts in the presence of perspective students and their families. Enrollment growth, significant in recent years, will be more modest in the next few years, but it is still fundamentally critical. Enrollment growth means expanded financial capacity. Enrollment decline means budget cuts. It is a rather simple and self-serving equation. It is not just Luther Hughes, Dean Kahler, and our Admissions staff’s job to attract good students to WKU. They coordinate and they hit the road and they give the campus tours, but it’s what people see across our campus and learn about our people—you, the faculty and staff—that determines the degree to which we prosper or suffer. Therefore, strategic priority number one is to nurture a stable and thriving enrollment profile.

We have, indeed, pressed the limits on tuition increases in recent years. We’ve measured the education pricing market, not only in our own state, but in states that surround us. We’ve priced ourselves closer to the University of Kentucky and University of Louisville and intentionally at a margin above the comprehensive universities in Kentucky. We’ve consciously closed the margin when compared to the higher education pricing averages in the states that surround us; yet, we remain below
the averages of every surrounding state except West Virginia. Enrollment growth and pricing strategies have been the primary means through which we have implemented our strategic plan in recent years. We have, however, reached the end of the strategy of implementing a mid-year tuition increase. We did that three years in a row. The first two of those years saw a mid-year tuition increase dedicated entirely to academic quality investments, and last year it was dedicated to campus construction priorities which could not be funded with state, federal, auxiliary, or private dollars. In fact, since 2000, tuition at Western has more than doubled. At the same time, however, we have nearly doubled our applicant pool and enrollment has grown by more than 4,000 students. Tuition increases, tied to investments in academic priorities, plus the dramatic growth in merit-based financial aid and scholarship opportunities, have put WKU on a path to achieve the quality and the national prominence necessary to become a leading American university with international reach.

Strategic priority number two, therefore, is to strengthen our academic quality. No way is that vision of becoming a great American university even fathomable without significant strengthening of the quality of our academic enterprise. Our confidence, however, is boosted by significant improvement in recent years in the quality of our classrooms, laboratories, and field experiences. Our confidence is boosted when we pick up The Courier-Journal, as we did on July 6, and read a front page article about what our faculty and students in our applied sciences are doing in the name of homeland security. It is boosted, when, just two weeks ago, we hosted an international symposium on thermal analysis. This quality thing is growing, and with it, our national reputation. Watch with me if you will an eleven-minute video dedicated to our growing academic quality.

Priorities for us in areas in which we will invest new state or campus revenue beginning next year include: the Kentucky Academy of Math and Science which will deliver the state’s most gifted and talented young minds to our classrooms and laboratories. We will open the Academy next fall with 140 of Kentucky’s brightest high school juniors and seniors. The retrofit of Schneider Hall will be finished next summer. Our Honors Program, with growth in numbers and in programming, will elevate the quality of our intellectual climate, and our study abroad programs will do the same for our students and faculty. Honors and international programming are areas entirely within our control. The degree to which these experiences are pervasive across our academic portfolio is ours to determine. We will continue to assess universities of national prominence and ensure that our Honors Program and our international programming begin to rival other great American universities.

Regarding Honors, I encourage you to get to know Craig Cobane. Dr. Burch and I share great confidence in his ability to work with our deans and faculty to build a premier Honors Program. Craig is empowered to build a full-blown Honors Program capable of attracting many of our state’s and our nation’s best students. Like Wayne Gretzky skated to where the puck will be, I want Craig to anticipate where the best Honors Programs will be in ten years and move us in that direction. Among our Honors priorities is to begin accumulating a list of students who earn the national and international prestigious scholarships for which students at great universities compete. It is our collective duties to help with the strategic priority to build a truly outstanding Honors program.

I have been pleased and impressed with the hundreds of faculty and staff who are operating smoothly and thoughtfully in the complex natural, human, and economic international environment. We are putting new and effective international travel policies in place. Flexibility and practicality are the norm. But so is prudence. Our policies are intended to facilitate normal situations, yet accommodate the inevitable extraordinary circumstances encountered in foreign lands. Systems
can either help and facilitate when unusual circumstances are the norm, or they can hinder, stifle, or frustrate. We will do everything we can to facilitate rather than frustrate, but we must use good judgment and communicate when we can. We will work with you. Jim Cummings, our Controller, is smart, objective, and helpful. He will also protect you and WKU's best financial interest. I, too, will be personally engaged in future study abroad programs in order to maintain an alert measure of the international needs of our faculty and students.

A major strategic shift, and a measure of our evolving mission, is our new emphasis on commercialization of intellectual property emanating from our classrooms and laboratories and the transfer of applied technology from our classrooms and laboratories to the work place. Here to help us do that is the newest executive officer in our academic structure—Dr. Sadiq Shah. Dr. Shah is our new Associate Vice President for Research and Economic Development. He's here to help us continue to drive up our numbers in sponsored research and to ensure relevancy in those numbers, and to help us embark on a new frontier, at least for us, in the dimensions of commercialization and technology transfer. Welcome Dr. Shah. As I'm sure you have learned in your first few weeks on the job that you are now partnering with a dedicated, highly capable faculty hungry for such initiatives.

While I am on the subject of applied research let me clarify what I mean. From time to time, I pick up comments from within that suggest something different than I intend when I describe our emerging emphasis on applied research. We are not, nor does our strategic plan suggest, becoming a research university. We are not a land grant institution in the absolute definition. Our focus is not basic research or the absolute search for new knowledge. We are, however, emerging as an institution which is growing more and more comfortable with subtle nuances in each of those areas. We do seek and discover new things with greater frequency. Our emerging mission does reflect the enabling concept of the land grant movement. But our definition of research is more focused on applied research. We are learning more and more how to take the existing knowledge in our classrooms and laboratories and apply it to the identification and solving of the problems of those people and in those communities within our reach. Teaching is and will continue to be our number one focus and our strength. Our teaching, however, will continue to be strengthened by the scholarly activity of our faculty and the degree to which our students are fully engaged in meaningful applied research initiatives. Applied research, commercialization, technology transfer, and a growing volume of grants and contracts which match well with state and federal priorities are all defining our evolving mission. It is wrong to say that we are trying to become a graduate research institution. It is right to say we are becoming a multidimensional relevant comprehensive university which is applying its vast knowledge to the economic fortunes and quality of life variables of the people we serve. While we educate students, we engage them and ourselves in the world which surrounds us. As we do that, we will become a leading American university with international reach.

With revenue from our state appropriations and tuition revenue a year from now, we will invest in state-mandated priorities which reflect our strategic plan in the form of regional stewardship, the popular term for the changing mission I just described. While most everything we do reflects our responsibility to be a good steward of the geographic region in which we are located, we will specifically invest in four areas as directed by our strategic plan. First, the Clinical Education Complex which is now open for business at the north end of our campus. My compliments to faculty in the College of Health and Human Services and the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences for your work to meet the heretofore unmet needs of autistic youth in our region and children with brain injuries and related problems. If you have ever had to deal directly or indirectly with such traumatic challenges, then you know how important this endeavor is for our intellectual community.
and our broader service region. Congratulations and best wishes to Mary Lloyd Moore as you get under way this month. Second, a somewhat related investment will be made in our Rural Mobile Health Units. We have been fortunate to receive several federal appropriations which were used to acquire well-equipped vehicles to extend our applied health related teaching and research initiatives to the betterment of underserved communities in our region which need proper health screening. The grants to acquire the trucks and equipment have run out and it is now our responsibility to fund the ongoing operations of these important outreach stewardship services. A third priority in our budget next year will be support for our emerging degree programs in Educational Leadership—especially at the graduate level. We will continue to position ourselves to gain the necessary approvals for WKU’s first terminal degree—a newly designed Ed.D. concept in Education Leadership. Sam Evans and Barbara Burch are taking the lead on this and will stay with until it is in play. A fourth area which will receive financial support in next year’s budget will be the growth of faculty and curriculum on our extended campuses, particularly in Elizabethtown and Owensboro. The growth of military related civilian jobs in Elizabethtown will place great pressure on us to respond particularly in business, human resource, and IT related disciplines. Owensboro, on the other hand, has great demand for growth in the sciences, education, engineering, and the arts. Our most opportunistic enrollment growth dimensions exist first in Elizabethtown and, to a lesser degree—but still important, in Owensboro.

Another area in which we must continue to invest is the ongoing technological development of our own campus. My compliments to Dick Kirchmeyer and our staff in Information Technology for the splendid job they are doing to ensure that we continue to have state-of-the-art technological capacity across our campus, that our teaching and research and campus communication capacities are contemporary in thought and design, that technology-related problems are solved quickly and effectively, that our students experience the latest in technological innovation, and that our campus completes the transition to a wireless environment in a timely manner over the next year or so. Hopefully, by the time I address you again next August, we will be, indeed, working in a wireless environment. We are about halfway there. Many of our buildings and outdoor environments are now ready for you to open up your laptop and go to work. In another year or so, you may do so anywhere on campus.

Another critical focus over the next few years is support for our Department of Environmental Health and Safety. Ensuring a safe and compliant workplace is important for a community of scholars. In recent months, I have charged Deborah Wilkins to bring objective, independent oversight to our efforts to ensure a safe and healthy environment and to make sure we are in compliance with state and federal laws. Proactive attention, as in any legal or compliance matter, will usually keep you out of trouble.

Because of several converging factors, we will also address this fall the ongoing matter of the level at which we will play football at WKU. Some of our Board of Regents would like to address the I-A / I-AA debate—with different expectations. This is an important matter which warrants an open, objective campus dialogue. I will conduct several forums this fall devoted to this discussion. Everyone’s input will be welcomed.

The final strategic priority on which I want to focus this morning is the physical place itself—our campus, our home—the buildings and grounds in which we work and across which we walk and drive. I call your attention to the map behind me. It highlights for us the progress we are making in the strategic priority of rebuilding the campus.
We have built and renovated buildings using state funds, private funds, auxiliary business revenue, tuition dollars, and federal money. We have completed $176 million in capital construction over the last few years. There is $115 million in projects under way right now. There is $66 million in approved and funded projects ready to begin. There is $57 million in projects awaiting state authorization. There are $78 million in planned but yet unfunded projects. There are $50 million in planned projects with KCTCS which give WKU added capacities in Owensboro, Elizabethtown, and Franklin. All total there are $541 million devoted to our campus rebuilding program—$240 million to academic buildings, $142 million to student life, $65 million to athletic facilities, $5 million to beautification, $39 million to shared campus use, and $49 million to WKU/KCTCS partnerships. These investments make up the physical aspect of our University transformation. These improvements are helping better serve all faculty and staff; better recruit, retain, and serve our students; and, better serve all who visit our campuses.

In a university community, the Provost and I share the unique, always interesting, usually helpful circumstance of being evaluated by the faculty each year. I always take important things from these evaluations which invariably help me focus on ways to improve my performance and the performance of those around me. I know Dr. Burch does the same. One comment this past year which I found particularly compelling was a simple statement in the open-ended section of an evaluation instrument. A member of the faculty said, "The job of President involves more than just raising money and building buildings." I have thought a lot about that statement. It is true to a degree, but, to get to the heart of the job description, I would add three things: defining and sustaining a vision for the University, leading a strategic plan, and dealing with the internal and external politics which surround and permeate us. Those three things speak to continuous improvement, academic quality, campus morale—nearly all the things about which I speak this morning—and pulling faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents, legislators, and the public together to achieve our vision. But when you get right down to it, when I think about how the Board of Regents assesses my performance, when I assess the strengths and weaknesses I bring to this job and how I—and many of you—assess the point from which we started in 1997, for many, it will, indeed, come down to raising public and private money and building and renovating buildings. If I am not doing those two things, then I am not playing to my strengths and WKU is not getting its monies worth.

I will keep pushing and driving us toward that vision of being a leading American university with international reach. I will keep pushing the envelope and measuring progress in our strategic plan. I cannot, however, help you teach and conduct research in your respective disciplines. I cannot, personally, strengthen our academic quality. It is my job to ensure that we have a campus capable and an environment suitable and inspirational enough for you to build a strong academic community. It is you who will achieve our vision. It is you who will produce the measurables by which we will be compared on a national scale. It is you who will produce research initiatives across the globe and will engage our students in international learning experiences—not me. I am going to push you, encourage you, applaud you, support you, create efficient and effective internal systems, and bring home as much bacon as I possibly can. In the final analysis, however, it is you who will determine the quality of this institution.

Together, we will keep raising private gifts. We will maintain an aggressive pursuit of state and federal resources. We will help anyone on this faculty or staff pursue a grant or a contract. We will keep a close eye on our business and service practices to ensure compliance, efficiency, and profitability. Yes, we will raise money and we will work with our facilities team led by Doug Ault and the superb group of project managers to rebuild our campus. We will make sure, to the extent absolutely possible, that our classrooms are well equipped and up-to-date and that our buildings
are made new—warm when they are supposed to be warm and cool when they are supposed to be cool—(give us time, some are more of a challenge than others) and that we build new facilities to meet our growing needs. Yes, maybe there is more to this job than raising money and building buildings. Those two things, however, are valid measures of progress. I have observed many presidents whose tenures were cut short because they didn’t do those two things well. Many presidents fail because they micromanaged the rightful domain of the faculty and were overly engaged in academic matters. Trust me to do what I do well. I am going to trust you to do what you do well. Together we will, indeed, transform this university and become a leading American university with international reach.

Let me add one more thought about our campus environment. It is no secret that I have a passion for the environment and for the aesthetic beauty of our campus. I firmly believe that first impressions last. Beyond the buildings and structures, this campus is defined by its unique terrain. The hill, the rock outcroppings, the trees, the beds and plant material are, indeed, defining how we are perceived. Our campus is shaped by the land and space that give it form. Those of you have been around for a while know that we experienced great deterioration and complacency throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century. As long as I am President of WKU, we will have a place which is pleasant, attractive, clean, and vibrant. We will have a campus home which is conducive to intellectual and physical stimulation. We will have a campus and a place that engenders pride and spirit and boosts our institutional self-esteem. It is necessary to embrace the environment in which we live and work and cause it to harmonize with our work and to nurture its own sustainability. It should be our intent, not just mine, but yours as well, to shape our outdoor spaces so that their calm beauty compliments the creative energies and intellectual strengths of our classrooms and laboratories. We need to create aesthetically pleasant spaces where open minds can meet to exchange ideas and ideals. Yes, we will continue to address the conflicting challenge of parking and asphalt. We will continue to add to the huge inventory of parking spaces which, by the way, has grown dramatically over the last few years. Parking next to the building in which you work on a campus which is inhabited by people known as Hilltoppers is not likely to be an outcome in which we all find optimum favor. One more thought about our campus. For our first 100 years, our campus lacked art. In our next 100 years, I want our campus to be a place where art is displayed and valued. We will devote some resources this year to visual art which brings an appreciation to creative talent and serenity.

I want to circle back now and return to my initial theme of things which occurred over the summer. Over a thousand students, faculty, and staff participated in a market research survey conducted by consultants we retained for this purpose. Kudos to Bob Edwards and our staff in University Relations for always taking the effort to conduct appropriate and thoughtful research before embarking on expensive marketing efforts and brand enhancement. In September, Bob will conduct a campus forum to share the results of this survey. Let me give you a few teasers. Four hundred and fifty faculty and staff participated in this survey, as did 1,100 undergraduate and graduate students. A beautiful campus was rated high as a campus strength. Our technological capacity did too. Academic quality was a positive, but not as consistently strong as it should be.

We have considerable work to do, not only in strengthening the quality of our academic experience, but in communicating the strengths which you are beginning to make possible. I encourage you to attend this forum. This information is important, timely, and critical to our near-term decision making.
Last year, I went to great lengths to talk about optimism and attitude. I handed out a survey which I encouraged you to fill out after last year’s Convocation. This year, I want you to fill out this one-page, ten-point survey and return it in a few minutes. It will only take a minute to do so. If you have not yet done so, please do that now. All of these things—resilience, taking problems in stride and bouncing back quickly, confidence, self-assurance, belief in our shared abilities, energy, vitality, creativity, the entrepreneurial thing—that spirit of entrepreneurialism which feeds us, an attitude that defines our personality and tells us we can do it, ambition, boldness, hope—that cup is half-full view of the world, happiness, the degree to which we hear laughter and see pleasantness all around us, that competitive spirit—you know, “the spirit makes the master” motto which, for 100 years, has defined us. If we are going to come to work every day then let’s be successful. Let us perform like a winning team. Let’s exhibit staying power—a strength to sustain us, an ability to balance patience with the persistence. Institutions are, indeed, like people. They have personalities. If you listen to many of the words I have used this morning, you will begin to see what I believe our personality is becoming. We have a growing confidence. The ten points on this survey cannot be left to chance. Starting this year, I am going to distribute this survey each year for the next several years at this Convocation. I am going to have Bob Cobb and our staff in Institutional Research tabulate the results. We are actually going to measure the manner in which our confidence and our optimism grows from year to year. I know what I think and feel and observe, and I communicate it often to as many groups as possible. I need to know, however, how you feel, what you think, and what you see and sense around you. Good, that should be enough time. I hope everyone has completed your survey. Pass them down to the center aisle and everyone sitting on the center aisle set the surveys on the floor. We will collect them as we dismiss. Thank you.

In closing, I want to return to that entrepreneurialism theme about which I spoke earlier. If we are to achieve our vision and if we are to document that a campus transformation is being achieved, then we must differentiate ourselves. We must be purpose driven. Our mission is noble. I hope your surveys tell me that our self-esteem is rising. It is those traits—attitude, confidence, and knowledge—that fuel the entrepreneurial spirit of our nation, of our state, of our community, and of our campus.

Brooks Atkinson, a long-standing New York Times drama critic and astute observer of this American democracy, said that, “This nation was built by men (and women—my words) who took risks—pioneers who were not afraid of the wilderness, businessmen who were not afraid of failure, scientists who were not afraid of the truth, thinkers who were not afraid of progress, and dreamers who were not afraid of action.” I like those words when I think about this academic community. I like those words when I think about our vision. I like those words because transformations cannot occur without them. WKU’s first 100 years was shaped by marvelous characters and talented men and women who built our traditions, nurtured our values, and gave us something grand on which to build—teachers and scientists, thinkers and entrepreneurs, and dreamers who were also doers.

So now we find ourselves on the eve of our second century. We find ourselves responding to a governing Board that is not satisfied to be what we once were. We find ourselves in a competitive environment in which complacency means decline and slow to react means lost opportunity. By being an entrepreneurial university, however, we depend upon seized opportunities and responding quickly and efficiently to change and to challenge. We depend upon each other to define and redefine ourselves and our strategic agenda. We owe it to each other to be a leading American university with international reach. Kentuckians and Americans and people of other cultures in other lands depend upon us to improve the quality of their lives.
Achieving our full potential will not be simple. As Oscar Wild once said, "The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple." We have solved numerous problems in recent years but there are many more to solve. The nature of complex organizations is that we must maintain an ongoing vigilance over recent solutions, so that past problems no longer plague us, so we can deal less with the past and more with the future.

We have momentum. Let's continue to fuel it. Progress is compelling. Not only is it fun to be part of something progressive, but it is also compelling for those who seek to be part of our university community. I challenge you this academic year to take ownership of both your destiny and of WKU's destiny. We are all benefiting from this rising quality, this improving campus, this broader impact, this stronger reputation, this "mission sprint" in which we are engaged. Ownership is the cornerstone of commitment. Nobody else will be held accountable. Lots of people might care and offer advice or criticism, but only we can take it and use it to our advantage.

I've talked a lot about our strategic plan today, but in closing, I conclude that it is not the plan that matters. Martin Luther King did not proclaim that "I have a plan." He said, "I have a dream." Our dreams are modest compared to his. They may not change the course of humankind, but they will change the course of a university. They will affect the lives of our students—past, present, and future. They will affect the careers of all of us who are willing to turn dreams into deeds. Those of you who are near the end of your careers, thank you. Those of you, like me, are in the prime of your careers, thank you for sharing this journey. Those of you who are new to this community, thank you in advance for your dreams and your deeds. If we are to be, then let's be bold. Together, let's become a leading American university with international reach. Thank you.