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UA3/9/5 Faculty & Staff Opening Convocation

WKU President's Office

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Welcome everyone to our Opening Faculty and Staff Convocation. I am pleased that you would be here this morning. With the renovation of Van Meter, we were forced to find a different venue for our Convocation. I originally intended to convene in the amphitheater, but there are those among you who suggested that it might be a little warm on August 22 to have an outdoor convocation—unless, of course, I could keep my remarks to ten minutes or less. I cannot say “good morning” in ten minutes or less, so I figured we had better head to Diddle Arena. It is not the intimate setting that I would prefer, but we will get back to Van Meter as quickly as possible. By the way, you will love the restored Van Meter when it reopens in 2010.

As we get started, I remind you to take a moment sometime during the course of our program this morning to fill out our annual optimism survey. We have included this survey in our Convocation for the last few years. It has been helpful for me to track this very unscientific and brief measure of our campus self-esteem. Data from the last few years suggest we are a rather optimistic campus with good morale and encouraging attitude. We just completed a difficult year, so this quick and informal assessment may be as important this year as previous years when we were hitting on all cylinders. Thank you for taking a moment between now and the time we adjourn to offer your responses. There will be someone to collect them as we leave.

I want to welcome all of our new faculty and staff. I am pleased that you are part of this University family. I trust that your orientation has gone well these last couple of weeks and that you are pleased with your new home, your new community, and your new University family. Will all individuals who are new to WKU—faculty and staff—please stand and let us welcome you.

It is my pleasure to introduce to you members of the Board of Regents who are with us this morning. I am honored that Ms. Lois Gray, Chair of our Board, would travel from Hardin County to be with us. Lois, if you would please stand. I would also like to introduce Mr. Jim Meyer, Vice Chair of our Board of Regents. Jim is from Bowling Green. Also with us this morning is Ms. Patti Minter, our Faculty Regent; Ms. Tamela Smith, our Staff Regent; Mr. Johnathon Boles, our Student Regent; and, also with us this morning, the newest member of our Board Mr. David Porter of Lexington. Once again, let us welcome members of our Board of Regents. That makes six of you, so I guess we have a quorum. No action will be taken or votes tabulated!

I would also like to introduce members of the Administrative Council. These individuals represent the various divisions of the University and the various structures which allow a complex university to function in a smooth and productive manner. If you would hold your applause until all have been introduced. I will ask them to stand and we can recognize them as a group. In alphabetical order, they are: Dr. Barbara Burch, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs; Mr. Howard Bailey, Vice President for Student Affairs; Mr. Tom Hiles, Vice President for Institutional Advancement; Dr. Richard Kirchmeyer, Vice President for Information Technology;
Ms. Ann Mead, Vice President for Finance and Administration; Dr. Richard Miller, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Chief Diversity Officer; Mr. John Osborne, Vice President for Campus Services and Facilities; Dr. Wood Selig, Director of Athletics; Ms. Robbin Taylor, Vice President for Public Affairs; and Ms. Deborah Wilkins, Chief of Staff/General Counsel.

Every December and May, we get a chance to acknowledge our faculty at our Commencement ceremonies. Today may be the only public chance we have to recognize our staff. All staff stand up. Let's all thank these dedicated employees for their hard work. They make this learning environment pleasant and efficient! I also want to thank three administrative units in particular—Facilities, Admissions—including the Registrar's and Advisement’s staff—and Housing and Residence Life. You helped get the campus ready, you helped get the students here, and you helped put them in a position to succeed. Thank you. Now I know these are campus-wide efforts and it all starts over now for next year. For this class of 2012, we all start today shifting focus from recruitment, to retention, and graduation. We start today to plug the leaks that allow a student to leave us. Thanks to all who make this complex set of dynamics come together to allow us to achieve the most important part of our educational mission.

I am going to approach my comments this morning a little bit differently than I have in past years. There is not a particular moment or monumental event on which to focus this year. In the past, we have used this Convocation to launch a Centennial celebration or kickoff a capital campaign or unveil a Strategic Plan, but this year is a bit different. This year I want to acknowledge the good things that are defining this University these days, so I am going to highlight that which has occurred over the last 12 months for which we should be particularly proud and from which we should draw energy and optimism. But, I must also acknowledge the disappointments we experienced over the last 12 months, reflect for a moment, and then we will move on. To help us move on, I want to focus on the progress that we made with funding priorities in our Strategic Plan in this year’s budget, in spite of the decline in state funding which we experienced over the last several months. In the interest in moving on, I will focus on the outlook I see for the balance of this year and next year. I will describe some of the behaviors that we must exhibit as we try to blend our work on this campus with what the State is expecting of us and what our students need from us. Finally, I will describe a number of reasons why we need to be encouraged as we move forward.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LAST 12 MONTHS

Let me start with some of the academic highlights. I say some because there were many achievements and accomplishments across all of our academic units this past year. A few, however, stand out because they were new, unusual, perhaps bold or particularly remarkable in the way in which they define or, in some cases, continue to define the achievement of our vision to be a leading American university with international reach.

Let me start with the Gatton Academy for Math and Science. This past year, we saw the first class of the Gatton Academy converge on our campus. We welcomed 120 of the State's most gifted and talented high school juniors and seniors. They lived on our campus, studied in our classrooms and libraries, ate in our campus restaurants, participated in our theatre and dance programs, and in our marching band, and our intramural sports programs, and waved a red towel as enthusiastically as any of our other students or alumni.
Fifty-four of this first group completed their Academy experience after only one year and most of them chose to stay at WKU to complete a baccalaureate degree. As of today, it looks like 35 of them have accepted a three-year scholarship which includes a baccalaureate and a master’s degree, an undergraduate research stipend, and a semester abroad.

The Gatton Academy is unique in higher education in Kentucky. It is the only such Academy in Kentucky. It has become a feeder to our Honors College and a strong stimulant to the intellectual environment which we continue to build. Now, going forward we will bring 60 rising juniors into the Academy each year. This newest class is here and ready to begin classes on Monday as fully engaged members of the WKU community.

The Honors College itself is a major part of the transformation of WKU into a leading American university with international reach—a transformation that can only occur if academic value paves the way. It has just been a year since the Board of Regents approved the creation of the only stand-alone Honors College on a public university campus in Kentucky. True to this bold action on the part of our Board, we are well on our way of achieving our goal of 1,200 students in the Honors College. This fall we welcome 925 Honors College students.

Our plan of enrolling approximately 300 each year is right on target. The good news is, while we grow the number of students in the Honors College, the academic quality measures continue to rise. The average ACT score of this year’s incoming group of Honors College students is 28.6. We are creating study abroad opportunities for nearly all Honors College students. Our drive to compete with the best universities in America is paying off with the awarding of prestigious scholarships. Not all of our Goldwater, Fulbright, or Gilman scholarship winners are in the Honors College, but the intellectual environment stimulated by the Honors College helps all of our students compete for such prestigious national and international honors.

Let me describe how the Gatton Academy and the Honors College are helping to build academic quality at WKU. Since 2000, we have had an 83 percent increase in students with an ACT over 25—from 445 to 814. We have a 213 percent increase of students with an ACT over 30—from 58 to 183. This fall, we saw 58 percent of the students with an ACT over 30 who applied and actually enrolled—183 out of 314. That is an increase of 138 percent in the last 3 years. The hypothesis here is that the Honors College is making a difference in the quantity and quality of high-achieving students who select WKU. The Gatton Academy will further drive these numbers up.

Perhaps the most significant single academic action to occur this past year was the final approval to establish WKU’s first terminal degree program. WKU’s new Doctor of Education in Education Leadership degree was approved by the Council on Postsecondary Education last spring. Its four tracks which serve teachers, school administrators, community and technical college personnel, and the not-for-profit sector will prove to be a significant economic development opportunity for Kentucky and a significant interdisciplinary experience for these graduate students and for our faculty. Most importantly, it will provide the impetus for significant leadership opportunities in our public and private schools, community colleges, and civic organizations. The first cohort of 25 students is enrolled and at work. We will repeat similar cohorts each semester going forward.
This year marked the completion of five years of impressive growth and impact through our Division of Extended Learning and Outreach. Since its inception in 2003, DELO has built a strong business model and provided a critical service to our students and to our campus. Our extended campuses are growing. Last year, we had 17,360 on-line enrollments serving over 4,200 students. Students can now access 20 different degree programs and 6 certificate programs completely on-line. It is the means to which an increasing number of students continue and finish a WKU degree.

If you are part of this University community, you cannot help but be aware of the rapid internationalization of the WKU experience. Our study abroad programs are steadily growing with a doubling of the number of students who are studying in increasingly familiar lands. We are engaging more and more faculty in international research experiences. We are bringing more international students to our campus and welcoming more international faculty to our classrooms and websites. We cannot become a leading American university unless we create a strong international reach, and our international reach is facilitated greatly as we become a leading American university.

I had the opportunity this past spring to attend the award ceremony on the final night of the National Forensics Association Championship which this past year was conducted in Nashville. I am not sure what constitutes a dynasty these days, but I think six straight years of being named national champions among all colleges and universities in American higher education may just conjure up thoughts of such a label. We all read about the Forensics team year after year winning the American Forensics Association Championship, the International Forensics Association Championship, the Lincoln Douglas Debate Championships, and the National Forensics Association title. It has gotten to the point where local and state media have become numb, "well, it is just another national debate title for WKU."

That would not be the case if it were our men's basketball program. Everybody knows about UCLA's string of basketball national championships in the 1960s and 1970s. Our society's preoccupation of sports tends to overshadow the significance of similar achievements of a more academic nature. Our Forensics students represent all of our undergraduate colleges. They were recruited from all over the country. They travel all over the country competing for this University. They work every bit as hard as any athlete. They compete under immense pressure and they do so for the love of the stage, the podium, and the thrill of victory. I don't know how long it will last, but I for one am sure enjoying the manner in which this element of WKU is proving that we can be a leading American university.

In February 2008, we were named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll with Distinction. Among Kentucky schools, only Berea College joined us in earning this level of recognition from the highest levels of the federal government. I am glad others are noticing the emergence of service learning in our academic community.

Last year, I was glad to see our graduate enrollment reach 2,757, the highest number in our history. We increased the number of graduate assistantships available to 269, and for the first time offered tuition waivers for graduate students, which together have contributed to an increase in the
number and quality of the graduate student population that is so essential to our continued growth in the scholarly aspect of our mission.

I can go on and on about several others. Certainly our School of Journalism and Broadcasting continues to perform at the highest level. As do our business students, especially our Students In Free Enterprise. I am so impressed with what our young entrepreneurs do to compete with the best universities in America after only a few short years of this emerging program. And, what about our students winning the ONE Campaign this past year. We were recognized as the top university in America in a national competition to fight world poverty. The national brand of this University is being made stronger by these and so many other efforts by our students, faculty, and staff. I apologize if I left anyone or any group out, so let me hear from you if I did!

Last September 14, we kicked off a $200 million capital campaign, A New Century of Spirit. This very Convocation was the initial means through which this campaign was publicly announced. Through the quiet phase which preceded that announcement last year, we raised $91 million in new gifts and pledges. We did that in order to make last year's public announcement in full confidence knowing that we were within striking distance of a $200 million goal to be completed by 2012.

Well, folks, a lot of work has been done this past year. Our total of new gifts and pledges to this campaign now stands at $123,113,806. This should give everyone great confidence that with four years to go, we have $200 million in our sights.

I hope everyone in this campus community understands the significance of this campaign particularly at a time when state funding is precarious at best. The private sector believes in us. Our alumni are embracing our vision. Our endowment is now over $110 million and is beginning to produce significant income to support our academic priorities. Every new endowed chair, every new professorship, every new scholarship, and every new gift for an academic program or building makes us that much more independent and secures a better future for WKU. One of the things I like to convey to donors and prospective donors is the manner in which our campus is energized and our self-esteem is strengthened by a six or seven figure gift. Success does breed success, and I like the success that private gifts are beginning to cause in our classrooms and elsewhere throughout this campus.

Speaking of progress across our campus, I am proud of the construction projects which we completed this past year. In the last 12 months, we opened a brand new Health Center to serve all of our students, faculty, and staff. This project was financed entirely with Health Center revenue. We opened the new Adams-Whitaker Student Publications building to serve our College Heights Herald and Talisman. It was built primarily with private gifts. We opened a new building on our South Campus to serve our Community College and our health disciplines. It was built with student fees. We opened a new food court building at the base of Pearce Ford Tower. It is not just for students. Check it out—great chicken, Mexican, and ice cream options! It was funded by our campus restaurant and catering group. We also continued the renovation of our residence halls through the Student Life Foundation. We opened a newly preserved and restored Faculty House. It was renovated with funds budgeted by Facilities Management. We opened a new WKU center in Radcliff, Kentucky, to serve the emerging demographic shifts through the Base Realignment and Closing Actions at Fort Knox. It was retrofitted with central fund balance revenues. We finished a
complete conversion of campus lighting. They have been installed the Facilities Management budget. We completed the process to become a fully wireless campus. This was done within the Information Technology budget.

I have been accused of trying to replace the cupola or the red towel as our campus symbol with a crane, but that is not true. Although it has been awhile since our campus landscape has not been punctuated with a construction crane. With several construction projects under way or on the way, I simply beg for your patience as progress continues. If you have grown weary of the construction, I would encourage you to talk to someone who was here for the 20 years between the mid-70s and mid-90s when we had very little new construction and deterioration had become the norm.

Finally, in terms of highlights of the past year, I must congratulate our Athletics Department on a banner year. We were the most decorated University in the Sun Belt Conference. Our academic performance included the greatest number of Sun Belt student athletes with a 3.0 GPA, plus the highest graduation rates, and the most academic awards in the Sun Belt Conference. We were also the only team in the NCAA men’s basketball tournament with a 100 percent graduation rate. I was pleased that the national media gave credit where credit was due in this regard. This kind of performance is a credit to our faculty, staff, and coaches all working to recruit, retain, and graduate serious students. Now let us duplicate that across the University. On the competitive front, we set a WKU and a Sun Belt Conference record with ten championships. There are only 19 Sun Belt Conference sports. Never before has one university won more than half of the league championships in a given year. This, of course, led to WKU winning the Sun Belt Conference All-Sports trophy for the fifth time—four in the last seven years. How about our men’s basketball team going to the Sweet Sixteen in the NCAA Tournament? Now that does not quite measure up to our Forensics Team and its success, but if the NCAA Tournament is where the nation’s attention is drawn in March, then I like being included!

DISAPPOINTMENTS OF THE LAST 12 MONTHS

The considerable progress we have made in the recent years was tempered by the $5 million budget reduction that was mandated by state government. Now is not the time or place to rehash the many difficult decisions we had to make—the jobs that were lost, the reductions experienced by many programs, and the compromises experienced throughout our campus. The amount of time and energy that was spent simply trying to fight off what at one time was projected to be a total cut of 15 percent—which to us was the specter of a $12.5 million nightmare. In the final analysis, we dodged the big bullet. But I never quite reached the point where, somehow, I could feel good about only getting a $5 million cut. Anyway you describe it, it was a difficult blow for all of us and especially difficult for those who were directly impacted. That book, however, is now closed. We did what we had to do. It is a new year and we are moving on. I hope that the Kentucky General Assembly will find the political will to generate new revenues, designate a significant portion of those revenues to education, and finally realize that higher education will determine the economic vitality of our State in the future.
STRATEGIC PLAN PROGRESS

The most frustrating aspect to me of our budgeting process leading up to the year we have just begun was the realization that the only revenue on which we could depend was the revenue generated by a tuition increase that forces our students to pay more than we would like for them to have to pay for a public higher education in Kentucky. I am proud, however, that we sustained the discipline to devote much of that tuition revenue to strategic priorities. But, by the time we covered unavoidable fixed cost increases and zeroed in on Strategic Plan priorities, there was very little money left for faculty and staff compensation. We were forced into making difficult decisions and had to choose between institutional progress, mostly in academic areas, and the pressing financial needs of our University family.

Before I highlight the spending decisions we made and the manner in which we honored our Strategic Plan and ensured institutional progress, I must acknowledge the competing emotions of pride and pain I felt in the way in which this campus accepted the most modest of salary increases—$500 per employee—at a time when costs all around us are escalating in dramatic amounts. It was clearly a year when individual compensation needs were sacrificed for the good of the University. For that, as President, I am grateful and I know that the Board of Regents shares both the pride and the pain that such an action creates. Before I talk about what the future holds, let me focus for a moment what the present will ensure.

Change done to you is debilitating. Change done by you is exhilarating. At last year’s Convocation on September 14, we unveiled a Strategic Plan with a business component which provided the financial capacity of success. We did not get the state funding which was called for in our plan, and we clearly did not expect the drop in state funding which hit us only four months after our plan was introduced. With $8 million generated from an 8 percent in-state tuition increase and a 10.5 percent out-of-state tuition increase, we were able to provide funding in some fashion for all nine of the Strategic Plan priority areas which I covered in considerable detail a year ago. If you remember, our Strategic Plan was based on the philosophy that we needed to control our own destiny and nurture entrepreneurialism uncommon in higher education.

We would do that through progress in a broad range of areas, but nine areas emerged as priorities for funding. The areas on which we chose to stake our transformation for the next five years include: 1) compensation for faculty and staff; 2) academic quality; 3) Honors College; 4) study abroad and internationalization; 5) Graduate Studies; 6) Library; 7) physical plant improvement and growth; 8) enrollment growth; and 9) regional campus development.

Those were the things we promised to improve last year and those were the things that we chose to fund with the limited dollars we created from a tuition increase in this year’s budget. One area where we failed to measure up was faculty and staff compensation, although we did provide a modest boost to faculty salary compression. I just approved last week $284,000 in compression increases for 212 faculty, which I will recommend to the Board of Regents for approval.

The bulk of our academic quality funds in this budget were devoted to scholarships. In the most difficult of budget years, we still devoted nearly $3.2 million to increased scholarships across our campus. We also ensured incremental funding for the Honors College and for the
internationalization of our WKU experience. Graduate Studies and the Library also received increased funding. We devoted increased funding to maintenance and operations for campus facilities, mostly to cover what was needed to open the new academic facilities on the South Campus. We made decisions that will ensure enrollment stability, if not growth, this year and in years to come. We significantly increased funding for Owensboro and Elizabethtown extended campus programs. We also found a way to direct new funding for our new doctoral program in Education Leadership, and to base budgeting for our capital campaign to ensure that the flow of private gift support continues to accelerate across our campus.

We also made a significant investment in our campus safety and crisis communication strategies. The tragedies that struck Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois provided a sobering impetus to ensure that this campus is fully prepared for any crisis brought by human cruelty or natural disaster. For those of you who have been away this summer, we ran two successful tests of our emergency broadcast system. We know it works. My deepest hope, however, is that it is never called into action.

Finally, we found a way to fund a mandated increase in our minimum wage for students and other employees on our campus. We also funded the necessary cost of faculty promotions and tenure. We increased our Kentucky Employees Retirement System rates. We put nearly half a million dollars into employee educational benefits, which continues to allow dependent children of our faculty and staff to receive tuition benefits. Of course, we had to fund a dramatic increase in utility costs. We would have liked to have done much more, but there is a limit to which tuition could be raised to do any of the things I have just described. We did this while sustaining our budget philosophy that every department and budget unit will continue to keep its division, own fund balance from year to year, and be encouraged to seek restricted funding from departmental initiatives knowing that no one will take departmentally generated funds away from any other campus purpose.

OUTLOOK FOR THE NEAR-TERM FUTURE

The days of the dramatic tuition increases we experienced for several years are now over. A few years ago, we were underpriced within our market. The State was cutting back. We seized those opportunities to significantly raise tuition, even to the point of imposing a mid-year tuition increase for three straight years. Between 2000 and 2008, we doubled the rate of tuition at this University. During that same period of time, however, we nearly doubled our applicant pool. We grew enrollment by 25 percent—nearly 5,000 students—and we invested heavily in academic quality, and we improved the quality of life throughout our campus.

Times have changed. We are now priced at or above the median of our competitors—both in state and out of state. Those with whom we work across Kentucky are focused on affordability like never before. Student debt is reaching unprecedented heights and the political forces are both focused and energized to ensure an end to the trend of large tuition increases. Just as pressing the envelope on tuition a few years ago was the right thing to do then, the right thing to do now is to limit those increases to the extent possible.
Three things loom on the horizon as we navigate the uncertain waters of state government and financial realities which confront us next year. The first is the uncertainty of the State’s revenue profile for the balance of this academic year. We are not out of the woods yet in terms of additional budget cuts. I hope we can make the case that even if state revenues continue to fall below projections that higher education should not be the target of any further cuts. But that line has become a long line in state government. There will be many other state agencies singing a similar tune—many of which were hit harder than higher education was hit this past year. The truth is, we simply do not know what lies ahead as the General Assembly readies for their spring 2009 session. I would, however, encourage you to advocate for whatever new revenues that you believe would be constructive for Kentucky and help the State fund its priorities. We will just have to make sure that higher education is one of them.

The second thing, as I suggested earlier, is that we will have limited tuition capacity for the next academic year beginning in the fall of 2009. The university presidents, working with CPE, have already begun discussing the tuition-setting process for next fall and the budget model we want to propose to the 2010 General Assembly. We are starting early because we want to avoid the tense issues which surrounded the fall 2008 tuition-setting process a few months ago. We want to get our Oar in the water early with the General Assembly. I reminded my colleagues just a few days ago when we met in Frankfort that WKU’s Strategic Plan, like those of most other public universities in Kentucky, currently targets the achievement of some pretty ambitious goals by 2012. There is only one state budget to be approved between now and 2012. The current biennium will take us through this year and next year. The General Assembly will convene in 2010 presumably to set a budget for the 2010-2012 biennium. We have only one more state funding shot which we can factor into our own strategic agenda time line. The university presidents are actually a rather cohesive group these days. Perhaps it is easier to work together when you are playing defense rather than offense. We will likely craft a budget model which calls for reasonable in-state funding for an extended period of time in exchange for a measurable decline in the rate of tuition increases over that same period of time. I would expect our tuition to average an increase of about 6 percent over the next four years.

This leads to the third reality which I see as unavoidable in the coming year. Next year, the second year of the current biennial budget will be an austere budget year for us. We know that little or no state funding will be forthcoming in the second year of the current biennium. We know the economy is soft at best. It may take a year or so before trends improve. We know that tuition options are limited. But, we know that tuition revenue will be the only meaningful source of new revenue for the 2009-2010 academic year. Given these realities, I will remind you of the investments we made in our Strategic Plan priorities in the current year and hope that you remember that we did that when next year rolls around, because I do not think we are going to be able to make such investments again next year.

As we work through the uncertainties of the next few months, we must zero in on continuing to cover fixed cost increases in 2009 and we must move compensation to the top of the list for the remaining capacity. We cannot afford to have another year with such low salary increases for our faculty and staff. There are too many uncertainties to make absolute promises, but I can assure you that the lead priority for any new funds generated from any tuition increase next year will be used to cover unavoidable fixed cost increases and to increase compensation for faculty and staff. While
faculty and staff compensation is at the top of our Strategic Plan priorities, this means that other strategic priorities will have to use well the new funds they received this year. This means we will have to settle in with current funding levels on new initiatives that have been introduced in recent years. This means there will be some great ideas which we will have to table or defer. This means we will simply have to get through this two-year biennium in a responsible manner. Since faculty and staff sacrificed this year, you cannot be expected to take it on the chin for the good of the institution again next year.

Now having said that, we will follow through on construction projects to which commitments have already been made, contracts let, and revenue streams restricted. We will also have to fund enrollment growth with revenues generated by a growing enrollment. I cannot expect our regional campuses or some of our academic departments to experience considerable growth and not be able to capture some of that growth revenue to address the cost of that growth.

Keeping with our theme of what to expect in the near future, I want to remind you that we do have construction projects that have been in the works for years, that are funded, and that will be under way in the coming year. The contract has been let to renovate Science and Technology Hall and the work begins this month. The contract to renovate Van Meter has been let and the work also begins in earnest this month. Construction fences are up around both buildings. The Preston Center project is already under way. Some parking lots which are funded will be completed this summer and some will be built or improved next summer. The architectural design process for expanding the Ivan Wilson Center for Fine Arts will begin this fall and a WKU building financed and built through Daviess County Fiscal Court in Owensboro has begun. We will also try to finish the renovation of Pearce Ford Tower and Keen Hall next summer. Our priorities for state-funded capital projects in the 2010-2012 biennium include: renovation of the Thompson Complex Central Wing, a new College of Business building, a new building in Elizabethtown, and Phase III of the renovation of the Downing University Center. We do plan to hire architects this fall and begin the design phase for a new College of Business building in order to facilitate state funding at the earliest opportunity. The only university-funded project on the immediate horizon is the final phase in the renovation of the Downing University Center. The funding source for that will be our auxiliary business revenues. The original debt on the Downing University Center expires next year. With revenues from the bookstore and campus dining, we will be focused on finishing the interior core of the Downing University Center over the next several years.

As we start this new academic year, I point out a couple of exciting new initiatives which will strengthen our academic environment. This fall we will be launching our Student Engagement Activities Transcript, which will document the full range of our students’ involvement in engaged learning opportunities, including such things as independent scholarship and internships, study abroad, cultural and diversity experiences, leadership development, service learning, and work with community partners. Over the coming year, we will also undertake a comprehensive revision of our General Education curriculum to ensure that our students are receiving a liberal foundation that develops their skills and perspectives in ways that are both challenging and cohesive, and which prepare our students to think, reason, and communicate with confidence.

You can also expect Big Red to be more like Big Green this year. Less paper and more electronic processing, more bicycles, reduced stress on building systems, the appointment of a
sustainability officer in Facilities Management, and, yes, our first LEED certified building—the new Tate Page Hall for the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. These actions will not be directed by me; rather, I am looking for recommendations from all of you. But, I am also looking for things we can afford, and I will avoid things that may cost us more than we save!

**DEGREE PRODUCTIVITY**

I have talked some this morning about how different circumstances are today than what they may have been a few years ago. Most of our circumstances are better, but change continues to occur around us. Among the changes that we must acknowledge is the changing expectation of higher education by those who determine our state funding and also by those who enroll. There was a time, perhaps, when we could teach and develop students and call it a day when a course or a semester or a year had ended. There is a different measure before us today. We are now measured on how many more degrees we award this year than we awarded last year. The higher education funding model has been reshaped primarily through a changing expectation in our society that if we enroll a student we have a responsibility to graduate that student. Now you and I know that there is value in every course a student takes, every hour spent in our residence hall, and every weekend spent on our campus. Every experience that a student enjoys on our campus adds value to that individual.

We are, however, a public institution and the public’s expectation today is degree productivity. That means that we must first enroll a growing number of students, we must retain them, and we must graduate them. Whether that is the best measure or not is subject to debate. We are not going to win that debate and it will do us no good to try to prevent or change that political wind. Therefore, I challenge everyone of you—every member of our faculty, of our administration, and of our staff—to take personal the responsibility to graduate every student who enrolls at this University. If we do not, we will suffer in the funding model. We will risk much of the progress we have made in recent years. We will be hard pressed to lay claim to the achievement of the vision which we have proclaimed so boldly and widely. Higher education in Kentucky has become a numbers game and the numbers that count are the graduates. No longer is enrollment the magic number. Percentages of those who are retained or who graduate are no longer measured. The key measure now, and for the foreseeable future, is absolute bachelor degrees awarded as compared to the number awarded in the previous year. It is that increment in growth in raw graduates from one year to the next that will determine a major portion of our funding. Not only do we have the responsibility to do it for the students who enroll, but we have a responsibility to ensure our own financial stability.

The good news is that we expect to sustain our record of 12 straight years of enrollment growth this fall. As of today, we are up about 250, but we will not know the full-time, part-time mix for another week or two. We will not know the financial profile until then.

Now we talk a lot about engagement, but I want to challenge you to become engaged with our students—in and out of the classroom. I have yet to find a student population that is more engaged than the faculty and staff which serve it. The optimum words here are “which serve it.” Those of you who are directly involved in advising have a critical role to play—and I would encourage all of you to be directly involved in advising our students. It is not just the job of the
faculty and staff in our Student Success Center. We all have a responsibility to guide our students in making the right decisions, but especially in making the right curriculum and course decisions.

Think of it this way, it is both unfortunate and expensive when a student graduates—if they graduate—with 10 or 20 more hours than they need to graduate. While those extra courses may have great value, it is debatable whether those extra courses are worth the increased loan debt that most students must endure in order to finish. I am talking about effective advisement here. If a student can be led to make the right decisions, to be efficient in course selection and avoid taking—perhaps valuable but not necessary—courses, and complete a degree on schedule with the required courses, then that student might save a full semester cost or more. At WKU, that means saving $6,000 to $8,000 or more. Let me put it in a more pragmatic term. If a student can avoid having to pay for or enroll in an extra semester, then they take up one less parking place for four months!

You get my theme here? A WKU education, while still affordable and still a bargain, has become expensive. The expectations and accountabilities for those who assess us have changed. For the sake of the students and for the sake of our own financial stability, I challenge all of us to do our part in making sure that we graduate the students we enroll and that our degree productivity grows from year to year. I reiterate, advising and educating students is not just the responsibility of the faculty who fill our classrooms. Every member of the University community contributes to the advisement and education of our students. Students do not shape this academic community. You do. I ask each of you to think about your role in driving this academic transformation, in driving students to graduation, to ensuring that they have the most powerful, most dynamic, most relevant, and most engaged learning experience possible.

REASONS TO BE ENCOURAGED

When our Administrative Council gathers on Monday mornings, I fondly refer to three of my colleagues, the three who deal with financial affairs, legal affairs, and governmental affairs as gloom, doom, and despair. Well, I have presented enough gloom, doom, and despair this morning. Normally, these convocation speeches are bit of a pep rally, with motivation for the coming year. That is why I am going to outline several reasons why we are, indeed, achieving our vision to be a leading American university with international reach and why we need to be encouraged.

Progress continues through the talents and energy of everybody gathered here this morning, 1) Our physical environment does continue to be improved. If you have been here for a while, you know that the quality of life is high across our campus. It is better than at anytime in our history, and it stands to get better yet in the next few years. 2) Our technological capacity continues to improve. We have fast access to the information we need. We have state-of-the-art research and Information Technology capacity. 3) Our applicant pool is strong, enrollment continues to grow, and the intellectual strength and academic measures of our students continue to improve. 4) The academic credentials of our faculty and staff are getting stronger each semester. We find impressive talent when we advertise for a position on our faculty or staff. 5) We have dedicated leadership and stability across the divisions of this University with individuals who have chosen to devote the heart of their careers to this institution. 6) We have a strong Board of Regents—a Board which is focused on strategic progress and achieving the transformation which they have
proclaimed since we formed a partnership 11 years ago. 7) We have a high energy cadre of faculty and students who are both engaged with each other and engaged in communities across our region. They are beginning to understand the correlation between civil responsibility, service beyond discipline, and the strength of this American democracy. 8) We are achieving significant progress in the private sector. Our capital campaign is ahead of schedule and our inventory of both current and private gifts is growing in dramatic fashion. People are investing in us. Just as students want to enroll here, our alumni and friends want to ensure they are successful here.

Perhaps now would be a good time to fill out your “optimism” survey!

In closing, let me point out that this year, on February 12, we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln. Unanticipated by them, and in some ways reluctantly, these two men changed forever the way we view and understand the natural world and one another, respectively. They reflected on the world around them, addressed complex issues, gave them meaning and context, and changed the way humanity engaged one another. They were students of natural order, and they were teachers. Standing on the shores of the Galapagos Islands or fields of Gettysburg, in the British Museum or on the National Mall, you can feel their inspiration and their impact in very real terms.

Not to extend the analogy too far, but isn’t that what we hope to do for our students? To prepare them, to inspire them? To teach them to integrate diverse ideas and viewpoints? To help them solve real problems? To model for them what it means to be a contributing citizen? To prepare them to shape the communities within their reach? To lead? Isn’t that what the WKU spirit means?

I leave you this morning with those very words that shaped our beginning as our institution in 1906, that have nurtured our traditions ever since, that framed the essence of our recent centennial, and that are at the heart of the WKU experience. The Spirit Makes the Master. Those words are not contrived. President Cherry did not go out and hire some PR agency to make that one up. Those words have not changed in 102 years, no matter how you define them. The WKU spirit is at the core of our DNA as an institution. That spirit sets this University apart. We have always done things a little differently. In recent years, we have embraced an entrepreneurial attitude. We have purposely chartered an aggressive course toward a bold vision. We are serious about this “leading American university” business. Just look around our campus. You will see the international reach taking hold. This pension for leadership. This sense of responsibility. This character. This will to succeed. This attitude. This spirit. This is Western Kentucky University.

As we begin this new academic year, we continue to redefine comprehensive university. We embrace the role as innovator, as entrepreneur, as risk taker. We thrive in an environment of applied research and practice-based learning. We cherish this hill, these trees, these rocks, these lawns, and we know the quality of life on this campus is matched by few others. We know we are achieving a point where we can, indeed, control our own destiny and not be controlled by those who might choose to define us by what either we have been or what they want us to be. We have what most other institutions envy. We have a spirit. We have produced 100,000 alumni who understand what it takes to master any task. We are a campus with a high self-esteem and the growing destination point for scholars young and old. We are Kentucky’s future. We will take all of the
traditions and values of those who have preceded us. We will nurture them as we change and grow and transform ourselves into a leading American university with international reach. We are WKU. Thank you.

Thank each of you for being here this morning. Please turn in your optimism surveys and let's have a great year.