Mr. Nelson, it is an honor to have you join us today. Your courageous leadership and selfless patriotism during the time of the American Revolution are held in highest esteem by those of us who have the privilege of serving at the college named for you.

I am pleased to report to you that, after forty-six years since its founding, the college continues to carry out its comprehensive mission of providing the citizens of the Virginia Peninsula with affordable access to opportunities for higher education and workforce training of exceptional quality. You can be proud that your countrymen and women have built on the political revolution of your generation, which ushered into the modern world the principles and practice of democratic self-government, with an educational revolution in our generation, which extends the benefits of higher learning to all. It is the realization of what your contemporary, Thomas Jefferson, termed a “natural aristocracy” and what we refer to today as a meritocracy—that anyone, regardless of conditions of birth and socioeconomic status, can go as far as their knowledge, talent, and aspiration will take them. Education has truly become the great equalizer in our time.

And to you, my colleagues in the 21st Century, my thanks for creating and sustaining the type of educational institution worthy of the heritage of Thomas Nelson and Thomas Jefferson. I thank those who have had a hand in planning today’s event under the leadership of Richard Hodges, and I welcome all of you to the start of the 2013-2014 academic year.

I extend a particular welcome to new faculty and staff members who are joining us for their first All College Day assembly at Thomas Nelson Community College. We congratulate you on your success in being selected for a position through the College’s recruitment and hiring process, and we appreciate that you have accepted our offer to share your expertise and service to benefit our students. I believe that you will find Thomas Nelson an exceptionally rewarding place not just to make a career, but also to make a difference for the better in the lives of many.
Many good things have been occurring at the College during 2012-2013, and much important work lies ahead for us in 2013-2014. Last year at this time, I noted that one of the things I had heard from many of you was the importance of recasting and upgrading the College’s website. Thanks to the leadership provided by Institutional Advancement under Vice President Cynthia Callaway and the support by Information Technology under Director Wayne Davis—and with particular appreciation to William Berry, Web and Social Media Communications Manager—we have developed a clear and realistic roadmap for moving ahead with this vital resource to which nearly everyone turns who seeks information about and connection with the College. What you see on the screen is just the initial phase of moving towards a more attractive and functional homepage. Behind this and beyond it are many substantive and technical revisions that are occurring, to include implementation of a new Content Management System, a more efficient way of processing web requests, active and responsive engagement with our students and public through social media, creation of a more functional intranet for members of the college community, and the hiring of a web developer.

Last year at this time, I noted that one of the things I had heard from many of you was the importance of recasting and upgrading the College’s website. Thanks to the leadership provided by Institutional Advancement under Vice President Cynthia Callaway and the support by Information Technology under Director Wayne Davis—and with particular appreciation to William Berry, Web and Social Media Communications Manager—we have developed a clear and realistic roadmap for moving ahead with this vital resource to which nearly everyone turns who seeks information about and connection with the College. What you see on the screen is just the initial phase of moving towards a more attractive and functional homepage. Behind this and beyond it are many substantive and technical revisions that are occurring, to include implementation of a new Content Management System, a more efficient way of processing web requests, active and responsive engagement with our students and public through social media, creation of a more functional intranet for members of the college community, and the hiring of a web developer.
I am also glad to call your attention to a very exciting Blackboard Mobile App that will be activated this fall. It will allow users to access the SIS, search for and enroll in classes, see their financial aid, and view other course-related information. At a later stage, students will even be able to use it to make payment. What I want to stress is the importance for all of us to be engaged in ensuring that the content and linkages for any web or mobile applications are current, clear, and accessible. That means our involvement in those areas that fall under our responsibility and our engagement in the type of collaborative writing and presentation of content that results in effective communication for today’s world. We have to give careful thought to how any information is perceived and used by the intended audience. We have come a long way with this project in the past year. Next year at this time, we will see that much more has been accomplished.

In the area of related technology, phase 1 of the upgrade to Microsoft Office 365 has been completed. Email now resides in the cloud, which means you can access your email anywhere without the use of a virtual private network (VPN). Also, access to all Office products is included, facilitating improved collaboration among those working on projects.

I am glad to note that the College’s Distance Learning Committee has been reconstituted. The committee consists of involved faculty who review the policies and procedures of our distance learning offerings and recommend updates and improvements for the support and engagement of distance learning students. The committee will be deeply involved in the goal for 2013-2014 to develop a genuinely strategic plan for distance learning at Thomas Nelson. The importance of this is clear when you realize that distance learning has been growing steadily at the College and now accounts for more than 23% of our enrollment.
Last year at this time, we also talked about the challenges associated with enrollment and how important it is. Not only is enrollment one of the primary indicators of how well we are doing with the access part of our mission, but the tuition and fees that come from enrollment are now the major component of our financial model—accounting for nearly two-thirds of the revenue that pays our salaries (that’s over 80 percent of our expenditures) and supports our operation. Yes, we are grateful for the Commonwealth’s contribution through the General Fund, but it’s now only about one-third of the income stream. In just six fiscal years, we’ve moved from reliance primarily on state support through the General Fund to primarily self-support through tuition and fees. That means that we must look principally to ourselves to financially sustain the institution. In turn, that depends on how successfully we handle enrollment.
Please understand that I am not talking, and will never talk, about chasing FTE for its own sake. What I am saying is that we must ensure that we have done everything possible to make Thomas Nelson Community College attractive, accessible, affordable, and desirable. This starts with seeing that our educational programs, and the schedule of classes that delivers those programs, remain current with best academic practices and responsive to evolving market demands. It continues with assisting students with navigating through the many steps involved with entering the College:

- clarifying life and career goals,
- selecting the appropriate educational program,
- testing for placement,
- requesting transcript evaluation,
- applying for financial aid,
- pondering course selection,
- registering for classes,
- meeting prerequisites,
- making payment,
- buying textbooks,
- getting oriented to collegiate policies and practices,
- and finally showing up for classes at the right place and the right time, ready to learn as a student and grow as a person through our instructional activities.

“I am talking about making these processes as clear, efficient, and as obstacle-free as possible”.

But more than that. It’s not just ensuring that no process acts inadvertently as a hindrance but also that each process also adds positive value to the student experience. As I heard Rick Dollieslager state so well in the final meeting of the Enrollment Management Task Force, every encounter with a student should be about learning. Each of us at any moment of interaction is a teacher. And whether we are successful or not depends ultimately on what the student understands and what the student does.
As a result of the work of the Enrollment Management Task Force, I am pleased that a number of concrete steps are being taken to improve processes, to include

- elimination of requiring documentation that is not used;
- providing a Registration Self-Service Center with strong staff assistance;
- ensuring that all those admitted receive a positive and informative letter of welcome;
- simplifying the steps for enrollment and providing a helpful checklist;
- triaging lines to ensure that no one waits for hours only to be told they were in the wrong place to begin with;
- and the institution of Nelson NaviGators, trained Thomas Nelson students who will personally greet and guide new students coming to the College.

“As this year continues, much further work in enrollment management will continue under the leadership of Dr. Dan Lufkin. The effort will emanate from Student Affairs, but it will involve all of us.”
Back for a moment to the numbers. After five years of steady enrollment growth—some 31 percent in terms of FTE—we plateaued in 2011-2012 and actually decreased by 2.5 percent in 2012-2013. With a recovering economy and a declining number of high school graduates, this is not totally unexpected. And in comparative terms with our sister institutions in the VCCS, we have fared better than many others. Across the system, enrollments decreased by 4.6% in 2012-13.

We have set a realistic goal for this year of maintaining enrollment at 2012-13 levels, and I am pleased to report that we did exactly that for Summer 2013. For the fall semester, however, we stand today down 5.6% in comparison to where we were at the same date last year. Please remember that the actions of all touch on the matter of enrollment and the critical importance that it has for our mission and our finances.
“To raise matters to a higher level, I would now like to turn our attention to the matter of student success.”

Access and enrollment get students in the door. Student success is not only retaining them but also ensuring that their time with us is productive in terms of moving through and completing a program of study. If we think of it as the collegiate counterpart to Maslow’s hierarchy, student success is addressing a higher order need. As you recall, a principle behind Maslow’s hierarchy is that the more fundamental needs, like basic bodily functions and safety, must be addressed before one is ready to consider higher level needs, like esteem and self-actualization.

In what I term the collegiate hierarchy model, we move up to concern with student success after we have dealt with the more basic matter of enrollment. There are even higher needs than success—student growth and development—but we will save that consideration for another time. The College Board has asked that we give the matter of student success special attention this year. The metrics associated with this seem pretty straight-forward, but they become more problematic when we examine them in view of the complexity of our student body.

The standard data model used by the Department of Education focuses on a cohort of first-time, full-time, program-placed students, and then tracks them over time. That leaves out a lot of students who started someplace else or who attend part-time. In fact, the most recent cohort represents just 7.8% of all students enrolled in Thomas Nelson credit courses in Fall 2012. On the other hand, the cohort also includes a lot of students who may be program-placed but who do not necessarily have a real commitment to an educational plan linked to thoughtfully considered career and life goals. Retention from fall to spring and fall to fall gets some attention, but the metric that really drives everything is completion.

Completion is defined as getting through a program in one and half times the period a program normally lasts. For our two-year degree programs, that means three years.
Here’s the data that appears on the College Scorecard, which is published by the U.S. Department of Education on its website and touted by President Obama as a source of reliable information about college value and affordability. As you see, our performance with completion (10.7%) is decidedly on the low end. In addition, the text gives us credit for an additional 11.1% of the cohort who transfer to another institution, but even the combined figure of 21.8% indicates that we have a lot of work to do in this area.

Achieving better results with completion is much more complex than enrollment. There are so many factors that can impinge on student performance, many beyond our control, and a lot can happen over the time a student is with us. And, as we know, many part-time students stay with us for much longer, dealing with issues of family and job, and are ultimately successful—yet are not counted for purposes of this metric. We are working on developing a more appropriate set of metrics for student success that reflect the multifaceted realities of our student body. In the meantime, student success remains a key goal for both the College and the Virginia Community College System, as reflected in the complementary strategic plans TNCC 2015 and Achieve 2015.
For the long term, I see Thomas Nelson putting in place a variety of strategies that will promote student success in general and completion/transfer in particular. One resource that the VCCS is providing us is STARFISH, an early alert system that has a good track record of use by other colleges and universities. Along with three other VCCS colleges, Thomas Nelson will be piloting STARFISH in the fall for students in our developmental math and English courses. These are the most at-risk group of students who are more likely to stop coming to class, who can benefit from tutoring, and who often fail to communicate their needs before it is too late.

STARFISH provides a systematic and convenient way for faculty to send timely messages to students related to their attendance, participation, performance, and behavior. In addition, faculty can use it to connect students with the college’s support resources that can make all the difference for students’ success. If the fall pilot with developmental courses goes well, we anticipate extending STARFISH to all classes for the spring. My thanks to Betsy Harrison and Linda Godfrey, who are co-chairing the implementation, and to all faculty participating in the effort.

We will consider more resources and strategies for student success in the years ahead. But there are some direct things we can do in our everyday encounters with students, and I know that many of you are already doing so. I just put these out to remind us of the fundamentals:
Let’s always make sure our students feel WELCOMED, from their first encounter in Admissions through all interactions with faculty and staff, whether face-to-face, over the telephone, or through email and the internet. Whatever the pressures of the moment, we are always glad to see or hear from students, and we convey that sense clearly.

Let’s remember that students need GUIDANCE. What’s obvious to us is not necessarily so to them. The ability to navigate the academic world of higher education does not come as a built-in GPS mechanism for most people. From the outside, it can appear very daunting. I can remember my own uncertainties and anxieties when I started as an undergraduate and later as a graduate student. Getting through processes, getting through classes, getting through programs—for most students, it doesn’t just happen. We need to point the way and provide the encouraging word that can make a real difference.
At the same time, let’s remember that learning, the heart of our enterprise, means personal change, growth, and development. Let’s always be sure to CHALLENGE our students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values that our classes and programs offer. To understand that it means hard work and self-discipline on their part. That the degree or certificate they receive is of significant value to them and to a university they intend to go to or to an employer they intend to work for because it means that they have accomplished something of definition and magnitude in the realm of learning. We set the expectations for their performance. And let’s always set those expectations high.

Finally, let’s remember that we do the extraordinary things that we do with so many people who weren’t necessarily on the road to success because our high standards are matched by equally high levels of SUPPORT. We complement challenge with care. Through assistance and tutoring in our various learning labs, through responsible accommodations offered through disability services, through a state-of-the-art technological infrastructure, through a variety of activities and services that promote social interaction and provide opportunities for personal growth, through countless exchanges that occur in office hours and emails and texting at 1:00 a.m.—we provide that additional support that makes the difference for so many students.
Let us also remember that these principles also apply to how we interact with one another as faculty and staff. To serve students well, we must first ensure that we serve each other well, recognizing, respecting, and, where possible, rewarding the roles that all of us play in the life of this wonderful institution. From numerous discussions that I have had with constituency groups, campus forums, the Presidential Leadership Institute, and the Institutes for Diversity and Inclusion, I know that we are far from perfect here.

But I also hear many inspiring stories of dedication, esprit de corps in action, going the extra mile. We are headed in the right direction in making Thomas Nelson a great place to work for all. We have high expectations for ourselves, just as we have them for our students, and we experience the sense of strong satisfaction and fulfillment that comes from working together not just in a collegiate institution but in a collegial way. Under the leadership of our Director of Human Resources, Joy Cooke, and with attention from all Cabinet members, we will continue to listen to you and to work with you to make Thomas Nelson an institution marked by both high performance and high job satisfaction.

As noted in my earlier message to you on the College budget, I am happy that one tangible benefit for this year is that all categories of eligible College employees are receiving a raise. I know that it’s never enough, but it’s been a long, dry stretch. In contrast to the occasional bonuses that have been provided by the state in the past several years, all these increases add to the base pay. Like compound interest, the benefits keep growing with time. With ongoing attention to the competitiveness of our salaries and within the constraints that come from prudent management of the budgetary resources available to us, we will continue to look for and use the levers that policy allows us for appropriate compensation of all employees.
In conjunction with our new Director of Development and Thomas Nelson alum, Lara Overy, and members of the Educational Foundation Board, I will be making an increasing number of calls on community members this year, cultivating relationships and soliciting support for the benefit of the College. Being able to share the significant commitment made by faculty, staff and College Board members will make a big difference in demonstrating why Thomas Nelson is worthy of their philanthropic support.

Let me also thank you for your increasing support of the work of the college through participation in the annual giving campaign sponsored by the Thomas Nelson Educational Foundation. This past year, faculty and staff contributed more to our internal campaign than in any prior year, exceeding the “stretch” goal by 12% for a total of over $33,000, a significant portion of which is used for employee and student emergency assistance.
As we look ahead to the challenges and opportunities for 2013-2014, nothing will require our continuing and focused attention more than getting ready for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, SACS for short. I know that we all realize how important this is. The major report on how we measure up, called the Compliance Certification, is due approximately a year and a half from now. And then the college’s major plan for improving student learning or the environment supporting student learning, called the Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP for short, is due in early fall of 2015. Next comes the site visit by the visiting team later in the fall and the final decision by the Commission the following summer of 2016.

Getting ready for this involves extensive work across the whole college, and Dr. Lonnie Schaffer has assembled an outstanding team to coordinate our efforts. They will be making a presentation later in today’s program.

As I have before, let me stress again the importance of the SACS standard for Institutional Effectiveness, particularly the subsection for educational programs. The standard requires us

1. to identify student learning outcomes for every educational program—that’s each degree, certificate, and career studies certificate that we offer;

2. to assess the extent to which our students are achieving those outcomes; and

3. to provide evidence that we are using those assessments to improve learning.

Because we could not demonstrate this for all our educational programs in our five-year report to SACS, we are currently under monitoring by the Commission. One critical goal for 2013-2014 is that by this time next year we can report complete compliance for this and the related standard for general education competencies. I know that many of you have been working on this, and I appreciate greatly the leadership and coordination for this effort that Justin Horton has agreed to provide in the coming year. I would also like to commend those faculty members who have engaged themselves in this process over the summer, and have demonstrated a full cycle of assessment for the 2012-2013 academic year. I am certain that these faculty members—Cece Wheeler, Darlene Putnam, Elena Kuchina, Leo Keneally, Teresa Frazier, and Tom Pringle—have all learned a great deal about their programs and students through their hard work on assessment, and can provide others with valuable guidance as we move toward full compliance in this area of Institutional Effectiveness. This remains a top priority for all faculty members and for Academic Affairs.
Another very significant activity for the coming year is the updating of the master plan for the Hampton Campus, which was last done in 2004, and the planning for the replacement of the college's original buildings—Diggs, Moore, and Harrison Halls. Vice President Charles Nurnberger will have a presentation on this later in the program. Thank you for the extensive college participation in the survey and committee work that has already occurred. Due to the good efforts of Mr. Nurnberger and his staff working with the College Board and VCCS staff, the time for significant attention to our facilities and campus layout has arrived. Not only will these efforts result in a functionally enhanced and more aesthetically pleasing learning environment for our students and employees, but we will be providing a renewed and attractive image of Thomas Nelson for the thousands of people who travel by the campus every day on I-64.
In a similar vein, at the recommendation and with the support of the College Board, we have contracted with a major firm with a strong record in higher education to examine our branding, the way we project ourselves to the larger community to ensure that they understand the importance of our mission, the quality of our work, the dedication of our faculty and staff, and most of all, of course, the success of our students. These are things that in the current media and technological environment an institution ignores at its peril. Expect to hear more as the year unfolds.
Among these are the ongoing work in implementing developmental education redesign in mathematics and in reading and writing. My deep appreciation to all who are working with such determination and dedication on these vital programs that prepare students for success in college-level work.

The implementation of a new faculty development and evaluation plan as part of the VCCS re-engineering initiative. This holds tremendous promise for enhancing our professionalism and for making what too often is a sterile annual routine a much more productive process tailored to the actual developmental stage of one’s career. My thanks to the committee headed by Paul Tessier that is diligently working on formulating the specific plan for Thomas Nelson that embodies both the vision and requirements of this comprehensive new approach to developing, evaluating, recognizing, and rewarding faculty.
The development of the plan for an Advanced Integrated Manufacturing Center at Thomas Nelson, which was funded by the 2013 General Assembly as part of the Governor’s Workforce Development Agenda. This important project, which will position Thomas Nelson at the center of efforts for strengthening the economic competitiveness and vitality of our region, is being headed up by Dr. Deborah Wright in conjunction with many stakeholders at the college and in the community.

The outstanding series of plays, musicals, and operettas taking place right here in the Mary T. Christian Auditorium as part of the Thomas Nelson Performing Arts program. Even if you missed last year’s Brigadoon, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and The Mikado, you can plan on being entertained and inspired by this year’s Cabaret, Our Town, and The Pirates of Penzance. Many thanks to Michael Sunblad, Sandra Calderon-Garza, Torrie Sanders and all others who make these wonderful productions possible that bring such credit to the College.
Let me finish by sharing with you a picture that hangs in my office. Shortly after I arrived, I asked Cece Wheeler if she could show me some samples of work by Thomas Nelson art students. This digital composite of an imagined landscape done in 2010 by student Christine Sullivan caught my eye. Every day when I come into the office, it reminds me that we are on a journey. Looking at it, you can feel the pleasurable rush of motion and excitement as one presses forward on the road towards the bright sun and alluring horizon, heading for a destination somewhere beyond the rise ahead. The journey continues for all of us. I’m very happy to be on it with you.
HAMPTON CAMPUS
99 Thomas Nelson Drive
Hampton, VA 23666
(757) 825-2800

HISTORIC TRIANGLE CAMPUS
4601 Opportunity Way
Williamsburg, VA 23188
(757) 253-4300

PENINSULA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CENTER
600 Butler Farm Road
Hampton, VA 23666
(757) 865-3122

MARY T. CHRISTIAN AUDITORIUM
Templin Hall
99 Thomas Nelson Drive
Hampton, VA 23666
(757) 825-2779

THOMAS NELSON WORKFORCE CENTER - WILLIAMSBURG
4135 Ironbound Road
Williamsburg, VA 23188
(757) 345-2855

SOUTHEAST HIGHER EDUCATION CENTER
(next to Heritage High School)
5720 Marshall Avenue
Newport News, VA 23605
(757) 283-7820 ext. 63532