

Thomas Nelson Community College
All College Day Remarks
August 16, 2017
President John T. Dever

I am very pleased to add my voice to all those who have preceded me on today's program in welcoming you to a very special year at Thomas Nelson, the Peninsula's Community College. How exciting it is to start the process of marking and celebrating the fiftieth year of the founding of the College in 1967, the start of the first classes in 1968, and the first commencement in 1969. Throughout the time from those beginning days until now, we can take great satisfaction in knowing that we have maintained true to the most fundamental part of our mission—changing students' lives for the better and enhancing our communities through the power of outstanding collegiate and career education.

How wonderful it was to hear the testimony from the panel of students about what the Thomas Nelson experience has meant for them! And I don't have to tell you that for each of them, there are thousands more who would offer similar stories of the personal transformation that occurred because of our quality instruction, our excellent services, and our genuine caring for the welfare and success of each and every student who comes to us.

This is the work that all of us do day in and day out. How good it was to hear the enthusiasm, commitment, and pride of the eight staff and faculty members who spoke on the "I am Thomas Nelson" video! Thanks to them, thanks to all of you, not only do our individual students have significant personal and professional opportunities opened for them, but our community, the Virginia Peninsula, is more socially cohesive, more economically prosperous, more civically engaged, and more culturally vibrant.

How proud we can all be as members of the Thomas Nelson community!

As we start the 2017-2018 academic year, I would like to address three things of particular importance to this community. First is a continuing discussion of our strategic plan, *Focus 2020*, that I started with you last year at this time. Second are some reflections on our ongoing efforts to promote a positive, supportive, and engaging organizational climate for all employees at Thomas Nelson. And finally, I need to share with you the severity of the enrollment decline that we are experiencing and what it means for us and what it requires of us at this moment in the College's history.

As I hope you recall, our five-year strategic plan came about in 2015 from considerable discussion and input from internal constituencies and external stakeholders. We were driven by two basic questions. Where do we want to be in five years, that is, 2020? And what will it take to get there? Three distinct but interrelated goals emerged: (1) improve the overall success of our students; (2)

strengthen partnerships with the Peninsula Community; and (3) enhance the College's capacity for excellence. And we fleshed out what each of these would actually look like by identifying more specific objectives related to each goal.

Last year on All College Day, we zeroed in on the first goal for student success and looked at some data that showed us to what extent our students were succeeding in demonstrable ways by completing their program or by successfully transferring. Not surprisingly, we saw that our students, most of whom work and have other significant life commitments, often took more time to complete or transfer than full-time residential students of traditional age. But we found that when we view their progress over an extended time period, a significant percentage did succeed; and those who did complete or transfer expressed overwhelming satisfaction with the quality of instruction and support services they received at the College.

Well and good, but the problem that we noted was that a significant percentage of students also fell by the wayside and were unaccounted for on their educational journey. And we know that without a post-secondary credential and the learning that it represents, the opportunity for many of these individuals to succeed in today's socio-economic circumstances will be severely limited.

Hence the importance of such initiatives as our enhanced onboarding of new students through Navigate; our restructured and well-resourced academic advising program, *Plan Now. Succeed Now*; our SAILS early alert system and the follow-up support it prompts for those students falling behind; our well-received Tutor Zone for students seeking additional assistance in mastering their coursework; and the intensive efforts of our faculty to improve student performance based on meaningful assessment of learning outcomes. These important efforts continue.

Now for goal 2, strengthening partnerships with the community. For a community college, partnerships are not just a good idea; they are integral to our mission. We are not simply located within a given piece of geography, in our case the Virginia Peninsula. Our whole purpose is to serve all the residents of our region who can benefit from our programs and services, no matter what their personal circumstances. We can achieve this only if we do so in cooperation and collaboration with other community organizations, whether they be educational, governmental, commercial, civic, or humanitarian. It is vital that we have their assistance and combined resources in connecting with and supporting those who come to us seeking to improve their lives and realize their full potential.

Working in partnership with our regional school systems is an obvious example. The dedicated career coaches that we have in a number of high schools are there to assist and advise the many students who do not yet have clear plans for what they intend to do at the end of their senior year. Our dual enrollment and early college programs offer capable juniors and seniors the opportunity to complete college-level courses *and* experience college-level responsibilities in both general education and

career & technical fields. Having had a positive experience with Thomas Nelson while still in high school, many of these students will continue with us after graduation.

Our Thomas Nelson Mechatronics lab at New Horizons Regional Education Center, our good neighbor just up Butler Farm Road, is a great instance of such joint programming in a career field. Lacking the necessary space here at the Hampton Campus to house the state-of-the-art equipment that we acquired with the support of the U.S. Department of Labor and donors to the Thomas Nelson Educational Foundation, we made a virtue of necessity by leasing unused space from New Horizons. The program there serves not only traditional and adult students but also high school students who are getting a great taste of the excitement and challenge of working in an inter-disciplinary way with modern technological processes. And the students' performance, as demonstrated by their attainment of internationally recognized Siemens certifications in Mechatronics, has been remarkable.

Of course, on the other end of the educational continuum, we work in close partnership with universities and four-year colleges to provide seamless transfer for students who come to Thomas Nelson to complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree. It is much more than just getting the right set of 100- and 200-level credits for direct entry into their intended major, although this is certainly important and needs the continuous attention of our faculty and advising staff. It is also about maintaining relationships with university colleagues to ensure that our students are fully prepared in the general education competencies that are the critical foundation to be successful for any bachelor's degree and for the ultimate professions and careers that they are preparing to enter.

Of special note are our co-enrollment partnership with the College of William and Mary, our Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies Program partnership with the University of Virginia, and our numerous joint efforts with Old Dominion University to which by far the largest number of our students transfer and with which we recently signed an articulation agreement in cybersecurity that is very favorable to students completing our associate degree program.

Another extensive range of partnerships are in place with the regional employers who rely strongly on Thomas Nelson to provide them with the well-prepared workforce that is critical for their success. These cooperative efforts with business and industry have been a hallmark of the College from its earliest days and have involved programs across all divisions and disciplines, from accounting and art, through English and engineering, and on to video production and welding. We take pride in offering education that prepares students for success in both life and careers. Numerous companies, both large and small, have formed productive relationships with Thomas Nelson that help make the Virginia Peninsula the prosperous and progressive community that it is.

Our latest venture of note is the partnership with Continental Automotive Systems, Inc., in Newport News, which is offering us significant renovated space, equipment, and subject matter expertise that enable us to stand up a Thomas Nelson Precision Machining Program to support the high demand for machinists by a number of companies across our region. Mounting an equipment-intensive program like this would likely be out of the question at this time without a strong partner willing to make a major investment, not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of the entire manufacturing industry. As you may recall, the College Board chose to honor Continental with the Dana B. Hamel Award for Workforce Development at our recent Commencement ceremony.

The new Workforce Credentials Grant program, launched by the VCCS with significant support from the Virginia General Assembly, has given Thomas Nelson the wherewithal to offer accelerated non-credit training that prepares people for immediate employment and gives them a foothold on the ladder leading to further education and career opportunities. Thanks to our partnership with Goodwill of Central and Coastal Virginia, we have leased space at their location off Mercury Boulevard in the Coliseum Central district of Hampton for our Center for Building and Construction Trades where we are offering programs preparing students for certification in such fields as facilities maintenance, HVAC, and residential electricity.

And it's not just a matter of being co-located. Goodwill's mission aligns with ours in "helping people help themselves through the power of work," particularly those whose life's circumstances have resulted in their having significant barriers to employment. From the populations they serve and with whom they have a trusting relationship, Goodwill helps us recruit for the Workforce Credentials Grant programs, provides wrap-around support services that are often needed by participants, and helps secure employment for the completers. This is partnership at a very high level, where our combined efforts create a capability much greater than what we could accomplish as separate organizations.

There are numerous other instances of productive partnerships that I could describe, but I think the point is clear. The strategic goal of partnerships reminds us that Thomas Nelson is anything but an island to itself or the stereotypical "ivory tower" that is so often associated with higher education. Yes, making partnerships really work requires ongoing commitment and much attention to cooperation on the part of both parties. But when effective partnerships happen, nothing is more powerful in ensuring that we as a *community* college remain on track in fulfilling our mission.

Let's now move on to this morning's second major topic: the need for all of us to address issues of campus climate, organizational culture, and employee engagement as reflected in the responses from faculty and staff to The Great Colleges To Work For Employee Engagement Survey sponsored by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. As you know, we have participated in this national survey in 2015 and 2016 along with all

other colleges in the VCCS. The second administration of the survey largely validated the results of the first one: there are some deep-rooted concerns at the College related to such matters as adequate facilities; to policies, resources, and efficiency; to institutional pride; to senior leadership; to faculty, administration, and staff relations; and to collaboration among units across the College.

The concerns are reflected in both the numerical ratings, where we fall considerably below the average for our sister community colleges in Virginia, and in the comments section that allows responders to express their opinions in more detail. Let me note that a considerable number of responders rate the College in very positive terms, but the weight of unfavorable responses tells us that we still have extensive room for improvement.

Steven Felker, our Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, has prepared an informative summary of the survey results that he has presented to a number of college groups. And I'll speak for him in saying that he would be glad to present to others who would be interested. To my mind, it is very critical that we share the findings as widely as possible within the college community.

At the same time, it is even more critical that we find ways to grapple with the implications and take concrete steps to improve those aspects of our culture and operations that we are telling each other need attention. We can never fulfill our mission of service to the greater community at the level of excellence to which we aspire unless we create a harmonious sense among ourselves about how we work together.

Let me be clear that, as president of Thomas Nelson, I own the results of the surveys and understand that I have a special responsibility to make things better. To that end, I have had productive conversations with Cabinet, with College Council, with participants in our Institutes for Diversity and Inclusion, with our College Board, with the Chancellor, and with a number of you on an individual basis. One of the things that these conversations have helped me realize is that, despite my special responsibility, I cannot by myself bring about the changes that are needed. The power to make that happen lies not with me but with all of us acting in concert.

Therefore, as I announced in my message to the college community last November, I have reached out to the three employee constituency groups—Faculty Senate, College Support Staff Association, and Council of Mid-Level Managers—as well as to Cabinet, and asked these groups to reflect deeply on the results of the surveys and to develop strategies that they will commit to over a multi-year period to improve our campus climate. College Council provided a monthly forum where the groups could report the progress of their deliberations and submit a report of their commitment at the end of the last school year.

The actions that the constituency groups committed to were ones that their positions within the College allow them to have control over and deliver on. That said, there were some striking similarities in what the groups identified as the most important things to do:

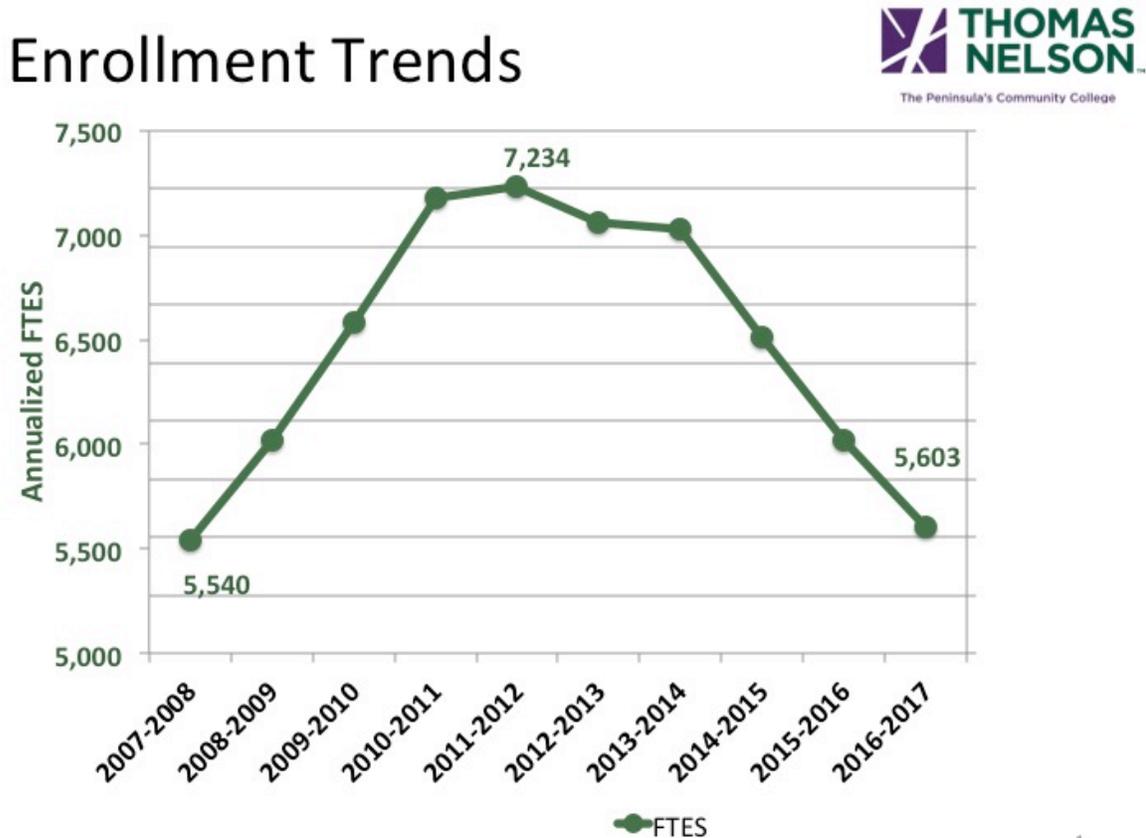
- One, to enhance the collective effectiveness of each constituency group so that it successfully represents the interests and perspective of its membership and thereby can contribute to the betterment of the members' working environment and to fulfilling the larger mission of the College.
- Two, to promote improved communication and understanding across the College about what various positions, offices, and units do and how we interrelate with one another—and depend on another—in the work of the College.
- And three, to ensure that we are all respectful and appreciative of one another as valued colleagues in our daily interactions, treating each other as we would wish to be treated ourselves.

Through the monthly meetings of College Council, we will continue to monitor the various efforts being made so that all of us working for Thomas Nelson can feel greater pride and confidence in the operation of the College and greater solidarity of common purpose with all of our colleagues.

I am pleased that the Nelson Excels Professional Development Program, which has been thoughtfully designed during the past year by Human Resources in close consultation with the College Support Staff Association, will launch this September. Also launching in September will be the Most Valuable Leaders Program, which is designed to equip supervisors and managers with the essential tools, knowledge, and skills to directly improve leadership effectiveness.

I also ask that each of us personally work within our respective organizational units and constituency groups to advance these efforts. When faced with an organizational situation that presents a difficulty for us or for our students, let the first thing that all of us do is to ask, "What can I do to make this better?" If that means bringing a concern or idea to the attention of a colleague, let us always be straightforward but respectful in doing so. And if we are on the receiving end of another's communication, let us always listen and respond professionally and constructively. Such patterns of behavior will go a long way towards getting us as a college to where we all want to be. Let's make this our number one resolution for the new academic year.

And that brings us to the most pressing and difficult topic that we need to discuss today—the long-term trend of declining enrollment that has reached an acute phase and presents us with major financial and organizational challenges. The chart that you see on the screen shows the 10-year picture.



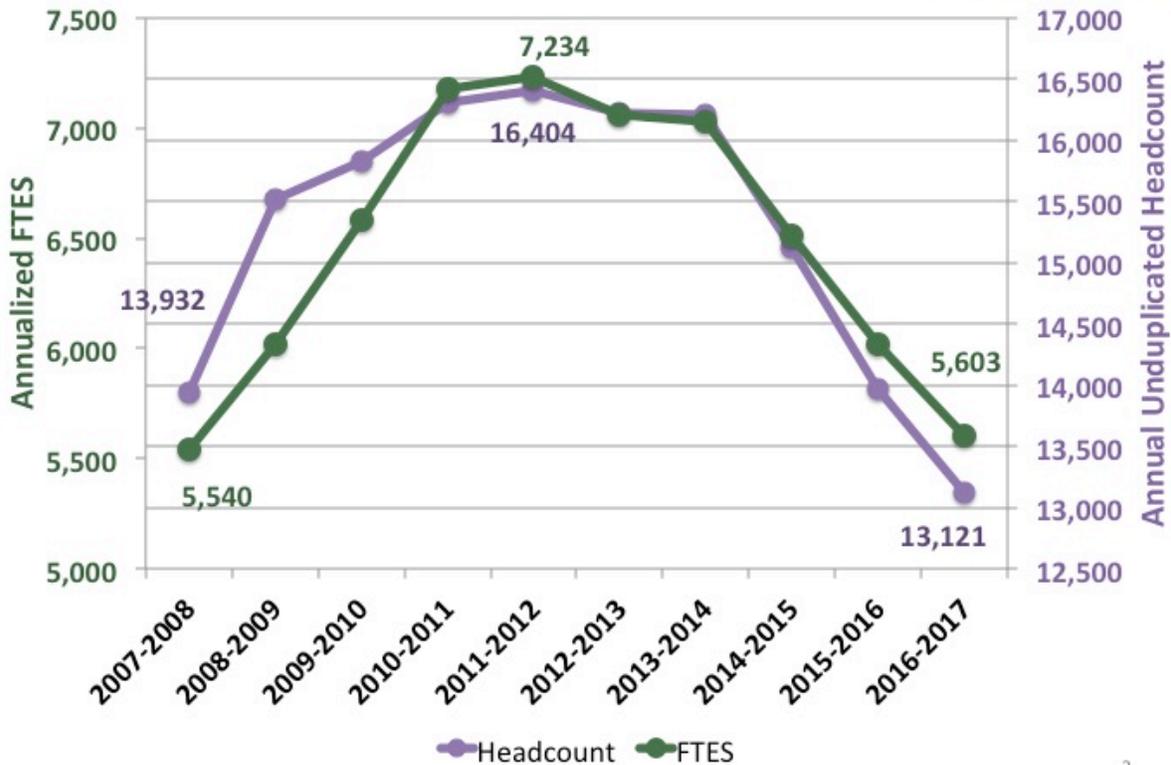
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In 2007-2008 before the start of the Great Recession, we stood at 5,540 FTES (full-time equivalent students). During the Great Recession and the economic distress that it caused for so many, we responded to the needs of those who came to us for upgrading skills and re-careering by growing 30 percent to 7,234 FTES. We also experienced expansion associated with the opening of the Historic Triangle Campus to better serve the upper Peninsula.

That's where we were at the height of enrollment in 2011-2012. After that, you can see two years of slight decline in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, followed by three years of major drops that averaged over 7 percent a year. At the end of the past year, 2016-2017, we were essentially back to where we were ten years earlier—at 5,603 FTES. When we track headcount, the number of individual students we serve regardless of the number of credit hours they take, you see essentially the same

pattern as indicated by the purple line superimposed on the chart.

Enrollment Trends



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With prudent budgeting and other belt-tightening efforts, we might have been able to sustain ourselves at this level, but unfortunately the decline has continued in 2017-2018, this time at a precipitous rate. We ended Summer 2017 down 15.8 percent in FTES and 11.2 percent in headcount in comparison to the previous year. The pattern continues for this fall: as of today, August 16, we are down 13.9 percent in FTES and 13.3 percent in headcount compared to Fall 2016.

We are not alone in this decline. The pattern is happening across the system with the result that the Chancellor has formed a major task force, to include several members of the State Board, to examine the underlying causes of the decline and to develop long-term strategies for dealing with a new reality. We are glad that Vice President Susan English has been asked to serve as the Thomas Nelson representative on this group.

That said, Thomas Nelson must address the immediate situation head on. Of course, as I have previously reported in messages to the college community, we have taken those steps readily available to us to promote enrollment: ensuring that all processes with onboarding and enrolling students function as smoothly as possible

and do not create needless barriers; marketing and outreach to target populations, to include recent high school graduates, veterans, and various other adult groups; expanding and enhancing the integrity of our dual enrollment program; working to retain a greater number and percentage of students already with us; promoting the value of a Thomas Nelson education—its distinctive combination of high quality and affordability—with selected audiences of parents, employers, and community members; and carefully reviewing our schedule to ensure that our programs and classes are offered at the right times at the right locations and in the right formats to meet student needs.

Given that the tuition and fees paid by our students are the major source of revenue for the College and given that the projected deficit in revenue for the year is over \$4,500,000, we have also taken significant steps to reduce expenditures as outlined in my message to you of July 7. These include holding a number of vacancies unfilled, limiting travel, significantly reducing the Other Than Personnel Services (OTPS) budget for various college units, and suspending some employee benefits for reimbursement. These decisions have been difficult and in some instances no doubt painful, but they have been necessary. We will continue to carefully monitor fall enrollment to guide any further decisions necessary for this year's budget.

However, we must realize that just reducing expenditures, however necessary for the moment, is not adequate by itself as a long-term response to the critical situation we are facing. Something has fundamentally changed in the world of higher education and community colleges across Virginia.

We know the continuing importance of our programs and services in a society and economy where education and credentialed skills are needed and valued now more than ever. Yet the way that students access all these is changing, and we must adjust accordingly. We must look at the structure and operation of the College, both in its totality and throughout its various units, and make organizational changes that ensure that we are functioning at the maximum levels of effectiveness and efficiency for the new reality. And such restructuring within constrained resources will inevitably mean for us, as has already happened at a number of our sister colleges, the elimination of some positions utilizing the state personnel process for reduction in force. Other positions will need to be repurposed. Some of these changes have already started; other changes will be occurring in the months ahead.

And so I think we all understand that the coming year will be one of exceptional challenge for Thomas Nelson and will require the best of all of us. We shall proceed thoughtfully and deliberately, forthrightly and professionally, and respectfully and resourcefully. If we act accordingly, we will be much better aligned with the new realities of the educational and economic environment in which we operate and thus far better prepared for our future.

I end by asking us to recall the beginnings of the College that we particularly celebrate at this milestone of our 50th anniversary. Back in 1967 and 1968, getting it all up and running was no doubt full of as much apprehension as it was of aspiration. Those who went before us were literally draining the swamp to build this College. Can you imagine the intelligence, the ingenuity, and the determination that had to be exercised by those pioneering men and women who made it all happen—to erect the original buildings and to stand up the original programs and services. They did what was necessary. We can too. But we must make it new, fitting the distinctive circumstances and opportunities of our own time.

It is therefore fitting that, with the substantial funding provided by the General Assembly, we begin this year the detailed planning and design for a new building to replace those original buildings—Diggs, Moore, and Harrison Halls--that went up in 1967-1968. It's none too soon. Our students, as well as you our employees, have been saying for some time that we need state-of-the-art facilities suitable for higher education in the 21st century, and with this replacement building we are now on the brink of starting to remake the Hampton Campus. At the same time, we also have the challenge of renewing our organizational structure and operations.

Knowing as I do how deep runs the commitment of our faculty and staff to the College mission and to excellence in carrying it out, I am confident that we can rise to the challenge and be all the better for it.

Thank you.