Welcome, everyone, to the 2012-2013 academic year at TNCC. Special greetings to all those who are new to the college.

Many thanks to Dr. Bill Travis, chair of the All College Day Committee; to Dr. Betsy Harrison and Mr. Tony Farley, our mistress and master of ceremony; and to all others on the committee who have worked to put together arrangements for today’s event. The way the academic calendar comes together this year and next means that we do not have the luxury of an extended time for meeting and professional development at our usual starting date in mid-August. The group is to be commended for their ingenuity in packing a lot into the four hours we have this morning to come together as a full college community.

On a personal note, I take particular pleasure in returning last October to Thomas Nelson Community College and having the honor to serve as your president. Thank you so much for your many acts of kindness and the many ways you have welcomed me. It has meant much. Over the past ten and half months, I have been repeatedly inspired by my interactions with faculty, staff, students, and community members. There is such a large reservoir of good will, such a deep commitment to excellence, such a strong determination to realize the highest aspirations for the college—I couldn’t feel more fortunate than to have the opportunity to work with all of you in building on such a foundation and moving us towards the possibilities that are truly within our reach.

And beyond the college, there are many on the Peninsula, within greater Hampton Roads, and indeed throughout the Commonwealth who tell me that this is the moment for Thomas Nelson. We have a track record of many accomplishments in academics and workforce development; we have a reputation of high responsiveness to the needs of employers and the aspirations of communities; we have the recognition from the public, the political leadership, and our university colleagues of the unique value we bring to the critical job of helping students to benefit from the rich resources of higher education and to prosper from preparing for and advancing in their careers. If we can take these elements and put them together in such a way that, as called for in our strategic plan, we take charge and shape our future, there’ll be no stopping us.

Some of you may recall that during the open forum for my interview here in the Mary T. Christian Auditorium, I lamented that I no longer experienced the “grocery store moments” that had once meant so much to me when I served here earlier as a faculty member in English. As I explained then, grocery store moments were those special occasions when, out of the blue, someone would come up to me in the supermarket and start a conversation to the effect that I might not remember them but they were a student in one of my classes several years back and wanted me to know that I had made a difference in their lives. Those encounters were tremendously gratifying to me,
but as I noted in the interview, they had pretty much gone by the board since I went into administration and then headed off to other places.

What I want to share with you today is that the grocery store moments have returned since I came back to Thomas Nelson! They’re actually taking place now in restaurants rather than grocery stores, but there is still a connection that somehow depends on food being present. And, of course, the moments are now not about me, but about you. When people learn that I am president of Thomas Nelson, they not infrequently want to tell me about the life-changing experience they or their children had at the college, and they particularly want to talk about the beneficial influence of one or more of their professors.

Several weeks back, when Vice President Deborah Wright and I were having lunch with some workforce officials, the waitress learned who we were and couldn’t contain herself. Now a student at The College of William and Mary pursuing a business-related major, she wanted us to know that two Thomas Nelson faculty members had profoundly helped her. One was her Accounting teacher, full-time faculty member Kelly Hines, who had given her the strong foundation she needed for her major and with whom she said she still communicates when she runs into something in her advanced classes that gives her a problem. And the other memorable teacher, adjunct faculty member John Dey, taught her philosophy, specifically ethics, and opened up for her a broad range of social and moral issues that she had never previously considered. In fact, as a result of the philosophy class, she is now doing volunteer work with Amnesty International.

That student’s experience encapsulates for me what it means for Thomas Nelson to be a comprehensive community college. We are comprehensive, that is, widely inclusive and of great scope, because we seek to provide our students with two big things: (1) preparing for a career that will allow them to take their place and keep advancing as productive members in the economic order of our society; and (2) broadening their minds about the larger issues of our world and developing their personal capabilities to be contributors to the greater good.

I know that when we get that question about what it means to be a comprehensive community college—and it was a question that was specifically posed to me by the All College Day Committee who suggested that I address it in my remarks—we typically respond with the various types of programs that we offer: on the one hand, the AA and AS programs that have a strong dose of general education and lead to university transfer; and, on the other hand, the AAA, AAS, certificate, career studies certificate, and non-credit workforce development programs that lead directly to employment. Of course, that’s nothing inaccurate with that answer that describes our basic offerings in education and training. But it could be misleading in that it implies we do one thing or the other for students—gen ed or workforce. We only succeed over the long haul, however, if we do both for all of our students in preparing them to be productive and contributing members of the larger community. The richer answer about our comprehensiveness as a community college lies in the actual experience of our students, as exemplified in the grocery store/restaurant moment I described for you.

As the first words of our mission statement boldly proclaim—we “change lives.” And we do so in line with the designated vision for the college: “TNCC will be the
preeminent provider of the most technologically prepared and globally conscious individuals in the region.” These two specific references to “technologically prepared” and “globally conscious” might be taken to be placeholders for the broader outcomes we seek for students: (1) prepared for productive careers; and (2) aware of the larger issues we face, whether domestic or global, and motivated to continue to learn and be part of the solution.

Let me offer the thought that for so many of the issues and challenges that we face as an institution, the student experience is the golden thread that we should follow. Too often all of us are too prone to perceive things from our own organizational perspective. As they say, if you want to understand politics, follow the money. And I would add that if you want to understand education, follow the students.

I’ve been using much of my time since October trying to listen, trying to learn about where Thomas Nelson is and where Thomas Nelson needs to go. I’ve met with our student leaders and with our constituency groups—Faculty Senate and Classified Staff Association, and I look forward to meeting soon with the Middle Managers Group. The Cabinet meets every week, and the College Council, with its broad representation, meets every month. Also, there are the meetings of the Presidential Leadership Institute and the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion. And there was a special meeting with the new faculty who, like me, joined the college during 2011-2012. Another rich set of insights was given by the large ad hoc college-wide group that met on February 10 with a consultant for a SWOT analysis in preparation for a major grant application. Further, the College Board and the Educational Foundation have provided an informed perspective on the status of the college and long-term guidance on strategies for the future.

In one form or another, in all of these encounters, I am looking for the answers to three basic questions:

- First, what are we doing well? Always start from strength.
- Second, where are we having problems? Always see the whole picture.
- Third, what should we be doing? Or to put it another way: What are the critical needs and outstanding opportunities? Or still another way: Where should we direct our energy and resources? Always look to the future.

I expect to keep asking these questions during the length of my tenure as president. If we can come to a shared understanding as to the answers and then act on those understandings, I am very confident we will move ahead in ways that continue to serve our students exceptionally well and make us all proud to be associated with the college.

In my message to the college community back in July, I tried to communicate how what we had been hearing and deliberating about helped to shape the budget for the coming year.

We heard clearly that the major face of the college for the public, the website, needs to be recast as a medium of representation and communication. We have made organizational changes and invested in personnel to achieve this outcome. Under the leadership of Institutional Advancement and the immediate supervision of Public
Relations and Marketing, you can expect us to be in a significantly different place with the website by this time next year.

We heard how important strong and up-to-date technology is for the delivery of our educational program and the provision of key services. With great resourcefulness, the Information Technology division has been able to fund approximately 98 percent of the requests that were made and validated through a highly collaborative process.

We hear insistently from employers and political leaders how critical it is for the economic and social future of the Peninsula that Thomas Nelson plays the major role in providing a well-trained and globally competitive workforce. With our partners at the Peninsula Council for Workforce Development and the VCCS, we sponsored a major study documenting the needs for advanced and precision manufacturing, and we’re doing something similar now for the health professions. Again, we are investing in the positions that ensure that we can deliver the needed programs. We are demonstrating to the employer community and the political leadership that Thomas Nelson can respond rapidly and capably to the dynamic demands of the marketplace. And in doing so, we are ensuring that countless members of the community have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to gain a foothold in today’s complex economy, with a good chance to advance up a well-defined career ladder. And we know that many of these individuals are currently pursuing or will have the motivation to pursue the even greater opportunities for higher education by completing degree programs from Thomas Nelson.

In regard to the Health Professions, we are pleased that our newest academic program, Dental Hygiene, graduated its first class of eight students this past May, all of whom passed their state boards and national certification exams. The program received its first full accreditation visit by CODA, the Commission on Dental Accreditation, in February, and all signs point to a favorable outcome of full program accreditation. To bring greater organizational coordination to all the existing health-related programs and to provide a systematic way of determining what additional programs are needed, we have formed a Health Professions Division under the leadership of Dr. Travis, who now wears two hats—one, as Dean of Health Professions, to include Nursing, Dental Hygiene, Phlebotomy, and Emergency Medical Services; and two, as Provost of the Historic Triangle Campus.

Let me also note the significantly expanded role of non-credit Workforce Development programs related to healthcare: to include, Certified Nurse Aide, Pharmacy Technician Professional, Medical Coding and Billing Specialist, Health Information Technology, and Medical Office Assistant Professional. And we are getting ready to start offering new programs in Medication Aide, EKG Technician, and Clinical Medical Assistant. I look forward to greater coordination between Academic Affairs and Workforce Development in marketing and in establishing appropriate programmatic linkages between their respective offerings.

The formation of the Health Professions Division further gives the renamed Science, Engineering, and Technologies Division the clear focus that is needed in providing leadership and operational coordination for the college’s efforts to pursue a variety of projects and collaborative activities related to STEM. I’m sure that you’ve heard the call from Governor McDonnell and many others for all of education—K-12, community
colleges, and universities—to produce greater numbers of graduates proficient in these disciplines and ready to support the type of economy that is key to the Commonwealth’s future. Nowhere in the state is that more important than here on the Peninsula, with its historically strong role in heavy industry, advanced manufacturing, and cutting edge technologies. And, of course, we have an excellent track record here—Thomas Nelson is the leader by reputation and by record in STEM-related programs among the other 22 community colleges. System data show us with the highest percentage of STEM-related enrollments and transfers. With focused attention, we are in position to leverage this strength for an even greater level of accomplishment.

Another thing we have heard clearly is that the pursuit of excellence will require resources that go beyond what is provided by the state through the General Fund and by students through the payment of tuition and fees. Therefore, with the enthusiastic support of an expanded Educational Foundation, we are reinvigorating our efforts to pursue private giving and grants. The Foundation has reconstituted its Development Committee—that’s the group that directly concerns itself with the solicitation of funds—and the college is hiring a development officer to support their efforts. We expect to see an enhanced annual fund and initiation of a major gifts program aimed at soliciting funds for specific projects proposed for academic programs and other areas. If you have a dream for the college that good organization, hard work, and sufficient money could turn into a reality, I invite you to work with your unit leadership and Vice President Callaway to develop a conceptual proposal that could be placed before corporate or individual donors who might well want to share that dream.

Also, in regard to development, let me note here that our internal college campaign this past year resulted in the highest total dollar amount contributed and the highest percentage of participation ever of annual giving by faculty, staff, and our two boards. I thank you very much for your generosity and for your strong commitment to Thomas Nelson as reflected in these results. With this level of internal support, we have the solid platform that we need to start engaging the larger community to consider its philanthropic relationship to the college at a new level.

So far I have emphasized opportunities we are responding to. There are also some challenges which we must face squarely and for which we must develop effective strategies to ensure they actually become opportunities. The key thing, I would argue, is not just to accept the challenge but to own it. As Chaucer and Shakespeare put it, make a virtue of necessity.

One of these is our SACS accreditation. As you know, accreditation is essential for our standing as an institution of higher education. Failure to maintain accreditation has two consequences of great practical import. One, our courses will no longer transfer to universities. That’s over half of our instructional program. Two, students will not receive federal financial aid. That’s over half of our students. After we submitted our five-year report, we received notice that we are not in compliance with the most consequential of the SACS standards—the one for Institutional Effectiveness. It requires us to demonstrate that we act in a mode of ongoing assessment and improvement both in terms of our administrative processes and—even more importantly—in terms of our educational programs. In particular, this means identifying educational outcomes at the program level, finding authentic ways to
assess those outcomes (often at the *course* level), and using the results in a demonstrable way for the improvement of learning.

As the Cabinet, College Council, and College Board can tell you, we've taken on Institutional Effectiveness for administrative processes since the day I arrived. It is not just a matter of compliance for us—it's the way to do business right. In regard to the instructional program, I deeply appreciate the widespread commitment I've seen among our faculty to address this large and complex matter. The good session that we had in Espada last spring showed me that there is a great willingness, even eagerness, to address this matter—not so much out of fear of sanctions, but rather out of the desire to take our instructional programs and student learning to the highest levels of performance. I'm confident that your diligent efforts, along with the leadership of our new chief academic officer, will result in not just a satisfactory outcome but one that makes us proud. Faculty, I ask you to continue to give this absolutely critical matter focused attention in the coming year and beyond.

Another critical challenge for the college is the comprehensive redesign of our enrollment management processes. Although there is no external agency, like SACS, hovering over us on this matter, it is something that students, parents, and the public are insistently telling us needs significant work. Therefore, in close consultation with Cabinet and College Council, I have asked Dr. Vicki Richmond to head a task force that is charged with first proposing a vision, and then a comprehensive plan for a substantially redesigned enrollment process. That vision is to start, of course, with the student experience, with particular recognition that the various types of students who attend the college have different needs—one size does not necessarily fit all.

Some questions to ask: How can new students and, in the case of many of the younger ones, their parents expect to be treated by all those they encounter at the college? What on-line information and telephonic guidance will they have access to? Will they know clearly what documentation they need to provide before they come to campus? What resources will they have access to in order to make good decisions about their educational goals, their specific program, and their class schedule? How efficient and user-friendly will they find the admissions, enrollment, financial aid, and payment processes?

We need to start with that student vision primarily in mind, but I have also asked the task force for another vision as well—what will a well-designed enrollment process mean for the experience of the staff and faculty at the college who carry it out every day? What understanding, training, and resources will they have? What values and attitudes will guide their interactions with students and with each other? What opportunities will they have for professional development? To what degree will they be empowered to act as needed by the circumstances of the moment? To what extent will they be consulted about making continuous improvements? How will successes and superior performance be recognized? How will issues and shortcomings be constructively addressed? How personally and professionally satisfying will it be to work at Thomas Nelson Community College?

Once the vision for both students and employees is established and reviewed, I have then asked the task force to move on to a complete plan for enrollment, starting with scheduling of classes and extending through the initial classroom experience, and all
the steps in between. I have asked not for tweaks to what we have currently, but a complete redesign from the ground up. It’s a tall order, but Dr. Richmond assures me that she and the task force are up to the challenge and eager to see it through. The outcome will make a tremendous difference for the college, both in terms of how we are perceived by the community and how we feel about ourselves.

One further challenge that we are rising to is the implementation of developmental education redesign. Along with the other 22 community colleges in Virginia, we launched redesigned developmental math this past spring, and we are scheduled to launch a combined approach to redesigned developmental reading and writing this coming spring. I commend the many faculty members involved who have made substantial, if not radical, changes in the content of instruction and the way it is delivered. And as with most any project, it has also involved extensive work by a large supporting cast—facilities, information technology, testing, counseling, enrollment services, division offices. Many others, I am sure. I know that such wholesale reform has not been easy. But I am very much assured when I hear that the involved parties continue to closely monitor and assess the outcomes, and then make the needed adjustments and refinements.

Again, following the golden thread of the student experience, as is being thoughtfully done at Thomas Nelson, will result in success. The fundamental questions: Are significantly more developmental students completing the required work and moving on to college-level courses in a shorter period of time? Are they then successful in those college-level courses? And, ultimately, are developmental students completing their total academic program and graduating? That was the vision behind the redesign, driven by the system-wide data that showed that although some developmental students were succeeding, far too many had been falling by the wayside without being accounted for.

And to put this in even a larger context, let me note that developmental education redesign is critical for holding on to that defining aspect of our mission—the open door, access for all who can benefit, the democratization of higher education. I firmly believe we cannot keep that door open and maintain educational quality without a strong and effective developmental studies program. You may be aware that there are some powerful voices in the land who are labeling developmental education a barrier to educational achievement, not a stepping stone—who are even calling for its abolition. Our challenge is to prove them wrong. At the annual retreat that the Chancellor holds every year, the reform of developmental education has been touted several times by one memorable speaker as “the silver bullet” that will determine whether or not community colleges are successful in meeting the special expectations that the Commonwealth and the nation now have for us—enabling many more thousands of students to gain credentials and complete degrees, which is so critical for our economic prosperity and social cohesion. I know we are up to the challenge.

If, in the words of Andrew Marvell, we had “world enough, and time,” there are so many other things that we could talk about, many of them things that are going well for the college—our strong Honors program, our remarkable achievements in the performing arts, our successes in promoting greater numbers of graduates and transfers, various special grant projects and partnerships, our growth in distance and
distributed learning, our fine TRIO program, the significant increases in the number of students receiving financial aid, the expanded range of student activities. The list could go on and on. But “Time’s wingéd chariot [is] hurrying near,” and we have many other things to do this morning.

Let me end this portion of the program by again saying how honored and happy I am to have returned as your colleague at Thomas Nelson Community College. I hope that, like me, you feel the immense sense of privilege and satisfaction to be a part of this institution of higher education that means so much to the people of the Virginia Peninsula. As we join together as a college community to seize opportunities and meet challenges, we will ensure that Thomas Nelson’s long tradition of excellence and service will continue to be our defining quality. It’s going to be a great year. We are all fortunate to be part of it.