Welcome to the 2014-2015 academic year at Thomas Nelson, the Peninsula’s Community College. It’s always good to see so many returning colleagues, and we extend special greetings to those who have recently joined us.

As we continue on our institutional journey of using our educational programs and services to change the individual lives of our students and to enhance the collective vitality of our region, I am pleased to tell you that we remain on course in our efforts to strengthen ourselves within the College and to gain the attention and support of the larger community. We do so by faithfully adhering to two key principles that are habitual at Thomas Nelson, embedded within our institutional DNA—responsiveness and excellence.

In terms of responsiveness, we are increasingly engaged with one another within the College to address operational issues and seize strategic opportunities. Slowly, but steadily and surely, we are wringing complacency, skepticism, and, yes, even occasional cynicism out of the institutional fabric. Increasingly, we are letting go of worn-out reactions like “We’ve always done it that way”; or “We tried it before and it didn’t work”; or “We’re no worse than anyone else”; or the finger-pointing of “The problem is so-and-so, but it’s certainly not me.”

Instead, we are acting more and more on the understanding that organizational vitality requires remaining true to our core values and mission while at the same time re-thinking processes, re-designing programs, re-purposing positions, re-casting our roles in line with an ever-evolving script, utilizing new technologies, pursuing innovation, and functioning as teams where the work of all is genuinely valued and everyone has the chance to contribute to the greater good—in short, Thomas Nelson Community College realizing its aspiration and capacity to be a high-performance learning organization.

Outside the College, we retain our well-deserved reputation for responding to the social and economic needs of our community when our educational programs and workforce services can make a difference. At the same time, we need to remember that markets are dynamic, and that dynamism applies not just to the economy but also to higher education. What worked well yesterday is not necessarily what will work today or tomorrow.

As for excellence, we continue to expect it of ourselves and of our students. Is there really any other acceptable or desirable way to do the things we do every day except extraordinarily well? Does anyone here want to spend their career associated with an organization that just gets by? Does anyone here tell their children that it’s OK to settle for C’s and D’s—forget striving for the A’s? Yes, I know that sometimes we fall short in our quest for excellence, but the important thing at Thomas Nelson is that we recognize when gaps exist and then we throw ourselves into improving the situation.

Our fundamental activity is to foster the intellectual growth, skill development, and value maturation of our students to the highest possible level. We know that we cannot produce these attributes in others unless we practice them ourselves. In our educational endeavor, there is simply no substitute for excellence.
And our community counts on us to deliver excellence. One of the rewards for me as president is to be in a position to hear how much our efforts are appreciated. Friday a week ago, the College hosted a meeting of a professional association for which I delivered a few welcoming remarks. When I took my seat in the audience for the rest of the program, the gentleman next to me signaled that he wanted to talk with me, and at the break he let loose—not with complaints but compliments. He told me that he worked for a major defense contractor with a long-term presence in our region. Over the years, his company had employed a number of engineers and technicians. And he wanted me to know in no uncertain terms that the best ones had come from Thomas Nelson, either directly or from a university after having transferred from Thomas Nelson. Yes, they were knowledgeable and skilled in their specialties, but they had one further attribute that set them apart—their ability to communicate, to express concepts clearly and cogently in writing and while speaking.

How gratifying it was to hear this external validation of the comprehensive collegiate education that is at the heart of our associate degree academic programs: students developing proficiency not only in the specialized areas that are the foundation for their careers but also in the broader competencies—those things we call general education—that expand their capacity for professional effectiveness and personal growth.

Another example of excellence: we recently received both a highly favorable story and follow-up editorial in The Daily Press about the Marine Skilled Trades Program, a partnership between Newport News Shipbuilding and five regional community colleges coordinated by Thomas Nelson Workforce Development under the leadership of Vice President Deborah Wright. Under the headline “A Program That Works,” Thomas Nelson was lauded for its efforts in providing accelerated and intensive training that resulted in a 93 percent hiring rate with 363 well-paying jobs for local residents. Talk about changing lives! Talk about enhancing economic vitality!

One final example from The Daily Press, this time a great story at the beginning of the month about an outstanding Thomas Nelson TRiO student, Kingdom Oguibe, a native of Nigeria, who has been selected for the prestigious Valley Proteins Fellows Program and further selected from among that group to visit China as part of a major cultural program. Let me let Kingdom speak for himself as reported in the article: “I have to succeed. The community looks up to me. The village looks up to me….My goal is to become a medical doctor and move back to Nigeria to help people out. They say, ‘Excellence is not a singular act but a habit. You are what you repeatedly do.’ I want to get better…I just want to become more knowledgeable.” Could we ask for anything more gratifying than one of our students expounding so well on excellence and the value of knowledge used for service?

Of course, there are numerous other examples of excellence from the College that could be cited, and I use these because the events or news stories have occurred within the past month. But I also have to tell you that we need to do more with communications. As I speak before various groups and participate in the roundtables with community leaders that we have set up as part of the College’s revitalized development effort, I constantly hear that we need to do a better job of getting our story out. People are generally aware of our presence, but often they are not quite sure about what we do, about those whom we serve, about how vital our work is for the benefit of the greater community, and about the areas in which we excel.

I have passed along that charge for better communications—both internally and externally—to our Institutional Advancement unit; and, of course, I make it a major
priority for myself. I think that you are seeing the fruits of these efforts in the informative Weekly NaviGator from NelsonLink that comes out every Monday morning, in the redesigned and much more attractive and functional Thomas Nelson website, and in the major rebranding of the College and associated marketing done at the urging and with the strong support of the College Board. We are also undertaking to develop much more descriptive and engaging content about our academic programs for the website and other publications.

As always with any problem or challenge, we need to start with ourselves. As all of us here develop greater internal awareness and understanding of our strengths and significant accomplishments, I ask that we all work to spread that message to the larger community so that they not only know the outstanding value and accomplishments of Thomas Nelson, but also go on to claim us and then support us in a much more meaningful way.

Speaking of support, let me commend you, the Thomas Nelson community, for your generosity in the internal portion of our Annual Giving Campaign. This past year, we raised our goal by 33% to $40,000, and we ended up exceeding that mark by 6% with a total of 144 donors. These gifts have helped fund scholarships, provided emergency funds for employees and students, supplemented program costs, supported professional development and mini-grants, and assisted with other good works that benefit the College and those associated with it.

It is a special type of organization—one driven by a compelling mission and genuine service—that can ask its own employees for contributions. But Thomas Nelson is that type of organization, and we send a powerful message to prospective external donors when we demonstrate this in our own actions. Our College Board and Educational Foundation are progressively more active in development as they increasingly come to understand and appreciate the full range of activities in which the College is engaged and how major projects originating with our faculty and staff can be advanced through private giving. When the call comes later in the semester for your participation, I ask that those of you who have made contributions in the past to continue to do so and that others give thoughtful consideration to joining in this effort. Also, on the development front, please be aware that the College is finally undertaking the long-needed step to re-connect with our many alumni in a systemic and sustained way.

Another special characteristic of Thomas Nelson as an institution of higher education is shared governance. Broad participation, openness, and teamwork are elements of this core value that we explicitly embrace. Faculty, staff, students, and administration all have important roles to play—and shared governance is at its best when there is regular communication, strong coordination, and habitual collaboration among the various constituencies. This past year, we moved forward in this area in a number of important instances.

At the prompting of the Faculty Senate and in consultation with the College Council, we gave focused attention to reorganizing our governance committees. As warranted by circumstances, we have eliminated, added, consolidated, and clarified committees. And the result is a much improved structure. Of course, this remains a work in progress that requires ongoing review and updates. Among the many committees whose members will tell you that collegial processes are genuinely working are several notable examples: Environmental Sustainability reporting to the Vice President for Finance and Administration; Curriculum, reporting to the Vice President for Academic Affairs; and the College Enrollment Team, or CET, reporting to the Vice
President for Student Affairs. The work being produced by these groups and many others is of exceptional quality.

Another great instance of shared governance has been the Ad Hoc Faculty Salary Study Committee, whose members have worked in collaboration with the administration to develop and oversee the implementation of a three-year plan that has resulted in substantial advancement in the competitiveness of salaries for Thomas Nelson teaching faculty. Still another remarkable instance this past year was the work of the committee under the leadership of Paul Tessier that developed the Full-time Teaching Faculty Development, Evaluation, Reward and Recognition Plan, as required by the Virginia Community College System. The Chancellor noted in his letter of approval that the Thomas Nelson plan was the first one in the system to receive full approval upon initial submission. How’s that for building a reputation for performance?

Let me acknowledge that acting in accord with our value of mutual respect and shared governance does not mean that we don’t experience occasional problems and real differences. In fact, far from it. If you involve many people, you are bound to bring out diverse perspectives. But handled, correctly, that’s a source of strength, not paralysis. Committees are a deliberative vehicle for sifting through those perspectives to settle on the best decision or recommendation. Some of you know that we’ve occasionally had some difficult conversations. But the parties have been both respectful and straight-forward with one another, with the result that they have found common ground that has moved the College forward.

The principal agenda for moving the College forward is expressed in our strategic plan, and it is now time to develop the next one. TNCC 2015: Shaping Our Future, developed during the previous administration, has been a highly serviceable document, one that along with the VCCS strategic plan, Achieve 2015, has provided the framework for the goals and outcomes we set on a yearly basis as part of our Institutional Effectiveness process.

To this end, under the coordination of the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, thirty representatives from all college units and constituency groups came together last March for a very engaging and productive day-long retreat. It started with an informative and sometimes provocative review of data and trends related to enrollment, student characteristics, student success, programs and offerings, faculty and staff, and resources. Breakout groups then went into depth on institutional assets, needs, opportunities, and aspirations.

The result was six emerging themes to consider for the next strategic plan: strengthening engagement with the larger community, enhancing systems for advising and communicating with students, enhancing college operations, improving student success and completion, capitalizing on college location and facilities, and building partnerships for college development. The group will reassemble for a follow-up retreat during this fall semester to consider additional information that comes directly from our students. These include the results from our own Thomas Nelson Student Experience Survey and also the results from the national Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), both of which were administered last spring.

On the basis of all this work, a draft set of goals will be developed and reviewed in consultation with the College Council and College Board, as well as in at least two forums open to the college community. The plan is expected to be submitted for approval to the College Board at its meeting in April 2015. It will then guide us for the next five years.
Concurrent with this is our overarching effort for reaffirmation of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, SACSCOC. As you recall, this involves the production of two major reports. First, the Compliance Certification, due in March 2015, which demonstrates with explanatory narrative and extensive documentation that we adhere to the core requirements, comprehensive standards, and federal requirements expected of all accredited institutions of higher education. Second, a Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP, due in September 2015, that lays out in considerable detail our intention to address a major need or aspiration of the College for improving student learning or the environment supporting student learning. Following on these two submissions, we host an on-site committee from SACSCOC that will visit the College in November 2015. The committee’s review of our reports, along with their direct observations and interviews with the college community, will form the basis for the Commission’s decision in June 2016 about our reaffirmation.

Under the leadership of Kelly Williams, aka Dorothy with the ruby red shoes, and the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, a number of college members have been involved in our compliance audit, policy review, planning for the committee visit, and developing and researching possible topics for the QEP. Moreover, under the helpful, and no doubt sometimes humorous, guidance of the multi-talented Justin Horton, our faculty as a whole have been working diligently on the critically important Institutional Effectiveness standard for student learning—identifying student learning outcomes for all our academic programs and general education competencies, assessing the extent to which our students are achieving these outcomes, and using the results for improvement.

My deep appreciation to all those who have participated in the reaffirmation effort. As I believe you will vouch from your experience, accreditation is much more than a ten-year exercise. It’s a way of thinking. It’s a commitment to ongoing operational processes for quality teaching and learning, for excellent services, for responsible finances and well-maintained facilities, for effective administration and transparent governance—all of which validate and certify to ourselves and to the world that we are a member in good standing of the higher education community.

I am happy to announce today that we have settled on a topic for our Quality Enhancement Plan. A committee headed by Vice President Lonnie Schaffer and Vice President Dan Lufkin reviewed the excellent work of the earlier Screening Committee led by Sandi Dashiell that proposed four possible topics for the QEP based on thorough research and broad-based consultation about institutional needs. All the topics were good ones and will be addressed one way or another in the work of the College, but the one that emerged on top was developing an effective advising program for our students.

As stated in the recommendation report, “the College could transform the campus culture by creating an environment where student success is a shared responsibility and where students are empowered to understand their options, identify resources that can be tapped, draw connections between their coursework and their personal and educational goals, and make informed decisions about their academic program and career.” The recommendation went on to cite the words of Terry O’Banion, the noted scholar on community college education, that if academic advising “is not conducted with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness, the most important function of the college—instruction—will fail to achieve its purpose of ensuring that students succeed in navigating the curriculum to completion.”
Dr. Schaffer and Dr. Lufkin are now in the process of putting together the core team to develop the advising plan and QEP document, and we look forward next year at this time to learning the results of their efforts.

The emphasis by O'Banion on “navigating the curriculum to completion” brings us to one of the most dominant concerns that has emerged for community colleges at national, state, system, and institutional levels—seeing that the students coming to us don’t just take a few courses or fall by the wayside without much to show for their time and effort. Rather, we need to intentionally and intensively work with them to obtain credentials that have value in the academic and economic marketplaces, to include associate degrees, completion of a baccalaureate degree after transfer, certificates, career studies certificates, and industry-recognized certifications and professional licensures that many of our programs, both academic and workforce, prepare students to obtain.

This heightened attention to completion and credentials is driven by the recognition that participation in the economy of today and tomorrow—doing work of value to the employer, doing work that is meaningful and fulfilling for the employee, doing work that provides a family-sustaining wage, doing work that provides opportunities for career advancement, doing work that promotes the overall social and economic welfare of our communities—all of this requires significant post-secondary education and training with something to show for it at the end—a credential. And that “end” is not a point of termination but often the foundation for the next step in educational attainment, one credential building on another in an ongoing process of continuous learning.

Hence, Chancellor Glenn DuBois at his annual system-wide retreat last week, announced a single goal for the new VCCS strategic plan—“triple the number of credentials awarded annually by the year 2021.” Hence, Governor Terry McAuliffe, featured speaker at the retreat, used the occasion to announce and sign, with his characteristic enthusiasm and flourish, an executive order establishing the New Virginia Economy Workforce Initiative. A major component of the initiative is setting the goal for Virginia “of attaining 50,000 STEM-H credentials, licenses, apprenticeships, and associate degrees that meet the immediate workforce needs” during his administration.

Thomas Nelson is well positioned to contribute to the realization of these goals for the system and Commonwealth. And our new QEP should do much to better structure our college processes to see that each and every student starts on a well-defined educational pathway that meets his or her goals, to provide meaningful guidance and support for all students as they move forward, to see that they complete and receive the sought-after credential, and then to work with them to transition to the next step of educational attainment, career advancement, and personal growth and development.

Another essential element of our vitality and relevance as a community college is continuously reviewing our curriculum to ensure that it is meeting the needs of our students and stakeholders who receive our students for employment or further education, and often some combination of the two. To speak frankly, over the years, a lot of clutter built up in the Thomas Nelson curriculum. Some programs just sat on the books without genuine faculty ownership or significant student enrollment. Under the leadership of Dr. Schaffer and with the thoughtful review of the Curriculum Committee and the College Board, we have eliminated some thirty programs in the past two years, largely Career Studies Certificates. We are the stronger for it since we can now give better attention to those programs that we are clearly committed to. In
several instances, we are significantly restructuring programs, always doing so in close consultation with our stakeholders. And, of course, we are looking to add new programs that meet emerging needs and opportunities.

One programmatic area that fits the circumstances of our region particularly well is advanced manufacturing. I’m sure that you have all heard and read about the revival of manufacturing in the American economy, and in no place in Virginia is that occurring more so than on the Peninsula. With its increasing automation, digital controls, and advanced technologies, modern manufacturing now requires exceptionally well-educated and highly skilled production workers, technicians, technologists, and engineers. The role of Thomas Nelson in preparing this workforce has been recognized by two governors and two sessions of the General Assembly through special appropriations for planning grants to the College for advanced integrated manufacturing.

The College’s Academic Affairs and Workforce Development units are working together very productively to develop short-term and long-term programs to meet these needs. Instruction is envisioned to occur in a production-based environment with state-of-the-art equipment and software. Work-based learning will be an integral part of the programs, with regional companies asked to provide rotational internships and structured apprenticeships. We will be prototyping programs within our existing facilities, but we are also working diligently on plans for a Thomas Nelson Advanced Integrated Manufacturing (AIM) Center, a new facility modeled on the best Advanced Technology Centers that exist at leading community colleges across the country. With strong support from regional companies, economic development agencies, the Peninsula Council for Workforce Development, local governments, and our legislative delegation, expect to hear more about these efforts in the coming year.

Another emerging area about which we are all aware is cybersecurity. Well-trained and highly ethical cybersecurity professionals are badly needed by all organizations that rely on information systems, and that’s now just about everybody. The need is particularly intense in Virginia and Hampton Roads because of the many companies and agencies associated with the Department of Defense. Again, our Workforce Development and Academic Affairs units have worked well together to connect us with major resources and stakeholders. We start this fall with offering a Career Studies Certificate, and we can expect more extensive work that will set us on a path to be a recognized center of excellence in cybersecurity. Particular thanks go out to the leadership shown by Michael Mann, Bud Barnett, and others involved with this effort.

I am also pleased to announce today that we are entering into a partnership with the University of Virginia to offer its Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) program at Thomas Nelson, starting at the Historic Triangle Campus. BIS is a flexible degree-completion program for adults who at the time of application bring 60 transferable credits with them, 15 of which must be from Thomas Nelson. They complete the remaining 60 U.Va. credits on the Thomas Nelson campus through evening, weekend, and online classes. Recruitment for the BIS program will occur during this academic year, with the first cohort expected to begin classes in Fall 2015. It’s a wonderful opportunity for Thomas Nelson to establish close ties with Mr. Jefferson’s University just as we are already closely associated with his alma mater and our good neighbor, The College of William and Mary. Be on the lookout for more information about the celebratory launch that will occur on September 22.

Finally, let me say a word about enrollment, the importance of which I have repeatedly discussed with you. After a number of years of exceptional growth, fueled
by an economy in recession, we, along with other community colleges nationwide and in our system, are experiencing declines. In terms of full-time equivalent students, FTES, we went down 2.5% in 2012-2013, but the decline slowed to less than a half percent in 2013-2014. We had a scare this past summer with an 11% decrease over the previous summer term. However, the outlook for Fall 2014 shows us starting to recover.

Let me emphasize, as I have before, that we are not interested in growth for growth’s sake. But we do want to ensure that we are always providing readily available and affordable access to all those who can benefit from the College’s programs. I am very pleased to see the enhancements that are occurring with our core services and enrollment processes. The New Student Experience sessions are overflowing with attendees. And those coming to campus to apply for admission are warmly welcomed by Nelson Navigators and initially guided on their educational journey by seasoned and carefully trained students in the new Peer Advising program. In numerous ways, those new to the College are receiving a reinforced message about the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities of being a Thomas Nelson student. They should arrive in our classes well prepared for the learning that is at the heart of our mission.

Also of note is significantly improved coordination among the enrollment, financial aid, and payment processes. All of this is reinforced by strong support provided by our Information Technology Division, extensive marketing by Institutional Advancement, and responsive scheduling of classes by the academic divisions. All involved deserve our thanks, and a special appreciation goes out to those who worked during the added hours of service this past Saturday.

There is important information to share with you about upcoming renovations, planned new facilities, and the long-term vision for our campuses. Vice President Nurnberger will be following with that presentation. I believe you will like what you hear and see.

Let me close with where I began. If we remain habitually responsive to needs and opportunities, whether they arise internally or come to us from the larger community; if we persist in the pursuit of excellence in everything we do, always committed to doing the most ordinary of things extraordinarily well; and if we stay true to the core value of mutual respect and shared governance in our ongoing operations and decision-making—then can there be any doubt about the outcome for Thomas Nelson? Success. It’s closer than you think!