Chancellor DuBois, Senator Norment, honored guests, students, and colleagues on the faculty and staff—in today’s ceremony, we celebrate Thomas Nelson Community College and the major role that it plays in the life of the Virginia Peninsula, greater Hampton Roads, and the Commonwealth. For forty-five years, Thomas Nelson has been carrying out its comprehensive mission to provide ready and affordable access to the benefits of higher education and preparation for careers. In doing so, the college has transformed the lives of numerous individuals who have been able to realize their personal aspirations for a better life for themselves and their families. In terms of full degree or certificate completion, over 25,000 students have graduated since the beginning of the college. But the benefits transcend the individual—our communities are stronger, our civic and cultural life are more vibrant, our economy is more dynamic because Thomas Nelson has been here making a difference for nearly half a century.

I make these assertions with confidence and conviction not just because I have had the privilege of serving as president of the college for the past year. I speak as a former Thomas Nelson faculty member and administrator, as a citizen who has made the Peninsula my home since 1975, and as a grateful parent. I know firsthand how deeply rooted within the college is the commitment to academic excellence, to the success of all our students, and to responding to the needs of our community.

In the audience today, I see the faces of many who have given deeply of themselves to fulfill these commitments and who have now gone on to well-deserved retirements or other pursuits. Representing these are the two honorary co-chairs for this event, my dear former colleagues Ms. Pearl Braxton and Dr. Turner Spencer, and our grand marshal Dr. Victor Thompson. I want to assure those of you who served the college with such dedication for so many years that the tradition of excellence you fostered is alive and well, and that the commitment to service you made continues with the current faculty and staff of the college.

But just in case you might have any doubt, let me remind you that one of your own still serves, and she keeps a sharp eye on college affairs and will never let us settle for anything less than quality. She was here when the college first opened its doors, and she has served continuously since then on a full-time basis, giving countless students the benefit of her command of the French and Spanish languages. Professor Gloria Smith, please stand and be recognized.

And still serving the college is a member of the staff who also was here at the beginning, starting just one month later than Professor Smith. For all these years, he has faithfully managed the set-up and upkeep of the college’s biology and chemistry labs as well as the greenhouse. He will tell you that he loves Thomas Nelson and that he would rather be on campus than anywhere else.
Robert Auerbach, please stand and be recognized for your many years of service to the college.

Also with us today are many members from the community and beyond who have supported Thomas Nelson Community College over the years. In so doing, they have made possible our successes, and they have directly seen the benefits of our work. They know that Thomas Nelson responds to critical needs that would otherwise go unmet, and it seizes significant opportunities that would otherwise be unfulfilled.

I thank all those who have served with distinction and dedication on the College Board, the Educational Foundation, the State Board for Community Colleges, and those who have given their time and talent to our advisory committees.

I thank our state senators and delegates who have effectively advocated for us in the General Assembly, our Congressional representatives who have helped in securing federal resources to advance our mission, and the elected officials and administrators of our cities and counties who continue to provide critical support for maintaining and developing our campuses.

I thank all those, both individual and corporate, who have been generous benefactors to the college and our students.

I thank our partners in the regional school systems, in Virginia’s Community Colleges, and throughout all of Virginia higher education as we continue to work together to fulfill the high expectations that our communities, our corporate stakeholders, and the Commonwealth have for us.

I have spoken several times of excellence in relation to Thomas Nelson Community College. I know from my earlier experience here that “excellence” is a word that has a particularly powerful resonance for the Thomas Nelson community. It is second in the official list of core values—superseded only by the commitment to student success. It leads the official list of prescribed qualities in our formal Code of Ethics. At Thomas Nelson “excellence” is a word that embodies both an ideal and a reality, an aspiration and an accomplishment, a promise made and commitment kept.

The social philosopher and public servant John Gardner famously defined excellence as doing ordinary things extraordinarily well. That definition is more than a memorable play on words. It encapsulates the answer to the fundamental question that he raised in the subtitle to the book he wrote on the subject: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?

In turn, that question captures one of the fundamental tensions in American society between two desirable but seemingly contradictory values—our devotion to equality and our celebration of individual achievement. Gardner resolves the paradox by associating the essence of excellence not with prestige or surpassing others—a rankings game. To employ a little educational jargon, he uses excellence not in a norm-referenced sense—how are we doing in relation to
others—but in a criterion-referenced sense—how well are we performing whatever task is assigned to us. Here is a key passage from Gardner’s book:

We must foster a conception of excellence that may be applied to every degree of ability and to every socially acceptable activity. A plane may crash because the designer was incompetent or because the mechanic responsible for maintenance was incompetent. The same is true of everything else in our society. We need excellent physicists and excellent construction workers, excellent legislators and excellent first-grade teachers. The tone and fiber of our society depend upon a pervasive, almost universal striving for good performance.

Every day at Thomas Nelson Community College, in the performance of our students and in the work of our faculty and staff, we answer John Gardner’s question in the affirmative—yes, we can be both equal and excellent. And, in doing so, we resolve the paradox that memorably ends Garrison Keillor’s weekly monologue about the lives of those who live in Lake Woebegone: *all the children can be above average.*

The issue of excellence brings us to a related question that is much in the news today, and one fundamentally connected to the mission of Thomas Nelson Community College—should we as a matter of public policy promote wide access to higher education? There have been a lot of opinions flying back and forth on the topic. One prominent economist breezily opined in a column that appeared this past May: “The college-for-all crusade has outlived its usefulness. Time to ditch it. Like the crusade to make all Americans homeowners, it’s now doing more harm than good.” Another economist went further in a June column: “There’s no evidence that a college education is an economic imperative. A good part of our higher education problem is that a large percentage of students currently attending college are ill-equipped and incapable of doing real college work.”

Assertions like these fail to take into account the considerable academic accomplishments and the breadth of post-secondary offerings by community colleges like Thomas Nelson. We are the accessible pathway for many in pursuit of the baccalaureate, but we also offer a wide variety of career, technical, and professional programs in various curricular formats: applied associate degrees, certificates, and non-credit training.

Community colleges have been at the forefront in the post-World War II expansion of educational opportunity for our nation. They have contributed mightily not only to long-term economic growth and broadening prosperity for the American people but also to the transformation of a society that has done much in the last half century, but certainly not yet all, to free itself from a tragic history of discrimination and to promote the genuine capacity for all in this country to pursue the American Dream.

At the local level, we can attest to the remarkable and vital learning that goes on in our classes at Thomas Nelson, particularly because of the stimulating mix of ages and life experiences in our student body, 45 per cent of whom are 25 years
of age or older. The veteran returning from service to country, the single mother seeking a better life for her children, the shipyard worker taking evening classes for career advancement, the mid-life career-switcher who now wants to enter the noble profession of teaching, the curious senior citizen seeking answers to some of life’s persistent questions—these and many others of the so-called non-traditional students contribute so much to the learning of the younger, traditional-age group who, truth be told, may not always yet appreciate the profound value of education. But put the diversity of ages and life experiences together in our classes, as we do routinely at Thomas Nelson, and the result is an extremely powerful learning environment.

Taken another way, some 10,700 of our students—that’s 65 per cent of our student body—is made up of what is termed “underserved populations”—first-generation, minority, or low-income students receiving Pell grants. Without the affordable and accessible option to higher education provided by Thomas Nelson Community College, many of these would find themselves shut out from the opportunity for personal growth and economic advancement. And the larger economy and society would be denied the benefit of the considerable talent and contribution that these students can bring to the marketplace and the community.

Let’s get a little more hard-nosed about it. Does the Peninsula, does the Commonwealth, does the nation actually need more college graduates? Here are some key findings in the recent report *The College Advantage: Weathering the Economic Storm* issued by Anthony Carnevale, director of the highly respected Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce: “Out of all the net jobs gained in the recovery, 2 million have gone to workers with a Bachelor’s degree or better and 1.6 million have gone to workers with an Associate’s degree or some postsecondary education. Workers with a high school diploma or less have lost 230,000 more jobs in the recovery.”

Carnevale goes on to describe how an economy transformed by globalization, information technology, and increasingly automated processes now requires a workforce with higher levels of both highly focused technical skills and broad-based general learning that makes one capable of adapting to ever-changing circumstances: “The result is increasing demand in hard cognitive knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as softer interpersonal skills and personality traits. In the American institutional context, this has meant a shift from jobs that require high school or less to jobs that require at least some college.” Elsewhere, Carnevale has documented the significant underproduction of degrees we have as a nation.

If you want to see how this is playing out on the Virginia Peninsula, just ask our friends at the Peninsula Council for Workforce Development and the many companies they represent. You will hear that our community is a poster child for the larger reality portrayed by Carnevale. There is a widespread and deep recognition on the Peninsula that our collective prosperity and the work of our educational systems are inextricably linked.

As for the Commonwealth, Governor McDonnell and the General Assembly have made 100,000 additional associate and bachelor’s degrees, particularly those that are
STEM-related, the cornerstone of the Top Jobs legislation for reform, 
innovation, and investment in higher education. Thomas Nelson is committed 
to doing its part—and more—in achieving these critical goals.

At this point, please allow me to take a moment of personal privilege and recognize 
some people who are very important to me. First of all, my dear wife Peggy, who 
has borne patiently with my many foibles and supported me in countless ways 
over our 36 years of marriage. Much more than I did, she had faith that this 
day would eventually arrive. Also in the audience are my dear daughter Sarah 
Sullivan and her husband Scott Sullivan, along with our deeply cherished 
grandchildren—Rylan, 12; Kaitlyn, soon to be 9; and Christian, going on 10 
months.

On a professional level, I would like to acknowledge the three outstanding community 
college presidents I have had the privilege of directly working for, each of whom 
has generously supported and mentored me by precept, guidance, and most of 
all by example: Dr. James Perkins, president emeritus of Blue Ridge 
Community College; Dr. Deborah DiCroce, president emeritus of Tidewater 
Community College; and Dr. Robert Templin, president of Northern Virginia 
Community College.

We now come to the obligatory part of my speech in which I make my attempt at “the 
vision thing.” It reportedly bedeviled George H. W. Bush during his presidency, 
and I've been struggling with it for the past year. I hadn’t been on campus but 
a few days when I ran into my former colleague, Professor Ann Barnard, who 
put it right to me: “John, we need your vision.” Her challenge has haunted me 
ever since.

Mr. Chancellor, with your act of investiture, I was hoping that I might become 
possessed with some preternatural quality that would inspire me to speak 
compellingly about the future of the college. But, in the absence of such 
miraculous intervention, let me share what I have prepared:

\- I see a college committed to its core function to produce graduates who will be 
both productive and contributing members of society—individuals who are well 
prepared to fill the jobs and careers that are needed in our competitive economy 
and who also understand that, as beneficiaries of public higher education, they 
have a responsibility as citizens to give back to the larger community, true to 
the spirit of selfless patriotism and public service that animated our namesake, 
Thomas Nelson of Yorktown

\- I see a college whose students pursue a broad range of programs that match 
their talents and goals, from Accounting and the Arts through Liberal Arts and 
Paralegal Studies and on to Web Design and Welding, with many other 
programs in between.

\- At the same time, I see a college that promotes the value of those programs that 
have been identified as particularly vital to the economic and social needs of 
our nation and Commonwealth—programs in the Sciences, Technologies,
Engineering, Mathematics, and the Health Professions. Let me add that nowhere else in the Commonwealth is wide-spread proficiency in the STEM disciplines more important than here on the Peninsula, with its historically strong role in heavy industry, advanced and precision manufacturing, and cutting edge technologies.

- I see a college that partners effectively with our regional school systems to ensure that those high school graduates who too often have been found to be underprepared in math and English skills at the point of admission to the community college will now be certifiably “college-ready.”
- And for those high school students who are academically capable, I see a college that works closely with school systems to provide them with opportunities in their junior and senior years to earn advanced college credit and experience a genuinely collegiate environment through Dual Enrollment and Early College programs.
- I see a college that provides our universities with an exceptionally able group of transfer students who, in the course of completing their associate degree, have become well-grounded in those core competencies, those habits of mind, that are vital for further education—
  - graduates leaving us as capable communicators in a variety of media and situational contexts;
  - graduates leaving us as clear thinkers who, as needed, can “do the math” and who understand and value the advances made possible by science while at the same time having a deep appreciation for diverse human cultures and societies;
  - and graduates leaving us as competent and genuinely literate consumers of information who can turn the myriad sources of information available today into genuine knowledge to be used for their own ongoing personal and professional growth.
- I see a college that, in close collaboration with Peninsula business and industry, provides those seeking jobs with fast tracks to living-wage employment in a variety of skilled trades and technologies that are critical to the region’s economy. And then working further with the employers and students to provide advanced training and learning opportunities that lead to educational credentials, industry certifications, and career advancement.
- I see a college that challenges its most capable and aspiring students through honors, through opportunities for leadership and performance, through sponsored travel and other forms of exposure to the wider world, thereby expanding the horizon of their ambition and opening up the broad range of possibilities available to them.
- I see
  - a college that provides a positive and memorable experience for all students it serves;
  - a college committed to the highest standards of quality and to highest levels of support for student success, resulting in significantly improved rates of completion and graduation;
  - a college whose faculty and staff find intense personal satisfaction and professional fulfillment in performing their responsibilities at the highest levels of proficiency;
o a college that models respect for diversity and openness to inclusion as a fundamental tenet of its daily operation;
o a college that continues to expand, renovate, and reconstruct its facilities on its two campuses and other locations in the community, ensuring that it has the academic presence and physical capacity to serve the ever-increasing educational and training needs of a growing population;
o a college that remains at the forefront of the rapid advances in technologies that enhance learning, whether in a face-to-face or virtual environment;
o a college that engages its alumni, community benefactors, and corporate partners at a new level of philanthropic support for educational excellence.

- In short, I see a college that, in fulfillment of its stated mission, “changes lives, empowers students to succeed, and enhances the social and economic vitality of the region through high quality education and workforce training, excellent service, and innovative partnerships.”

And that finally brings me to the theme I have chosen for this celebratory event—“something of great constancy”—a pregnant phrase from the fifth act of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play that will be staged this coming spring here in the Mary T. Christian Auditorium as part of the outstanding Thomas Nelson Performing Arts Program.

As you may recall, or as you may see in this spring’s production, the four young lovers in the play undergo intensely transformative experiences during a night in the Athenian woods involving a dazzling array of misperceptions and shifting emotional loyalties. Unbeknownst to them, a parallel world of fairies, particularly the master trickster Puck, adds to both the comic confusion and ultimate resolution in conjugal celebration.

The fifth act begins with a famous exchange between the presiding Duke Theseus and his betrothed, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. At issue is whether there is any credibility in the crazy-quilt story that the four young lovers have recounted to them about their evening in the woods. Duke Theseus is highly skeptical and thinks it’s all made up and delusional. He talks scathingly about the “seething brains” and “shaping fantasies” of a group he considers as prone to such wild imaginings: “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet”—now there’s good company for a community college president!

Theseus quickly disposes of the lunatic and lover, saving his heavy artillery for the poet, Shakespeare’s own profession:

The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
To repeat: “gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name”—could there ever be a better definition of “the vision thing” than that?

Queen Hippolyta counters the skepticism of Theseus with an alternative explanation of events:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy’s images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable.

Hippolyta’s view is that the dream-like experience as recounted by the lovers is believable precisely because of the transformative effect it has had on their lives, as evidenced by their ability to speak consistently and convincingly about it. Their tale is not just the product of an untethered imagination, such as what Theseus derides. She perceives more deeply that minds have been “transfigured so together,” with the result being “something of great constancy.”

So it is with Thomas Nelson Community College—our essence lies in the countless students whose lives have been transformed by the power of education and, at an even higher level for some, by the love of learning. The college can make this difference in people’s lives because it itself is grounded in constancy of purpose yet open to change. We know who we are, and we are confident in the worth of what we do. At the same time, we are anything but complacent. We continually adapt and renew ourselves in response to the needs and aspirations of our community. You can count on us.

And, yes, as an institution Thomas Nelson Community College has had its own moments of drama. But we turn conflict into challenge, and challenge into growth. And we always emerge stronger. Our past is rich in accomplishments, and our future is bright with promise.

Thank you.