Good morning. I hope it is not an unlucky coincidence, but this is my 13th University Convocation address as Chancellor. I’m not by nature particularly superstitious, but for just a moment I considered whether it would make sense to do what many developers have done and that is to eliminate floor 13 from the elevators in high rise buildings. If I followed that practice, it would mean that this is my 14th State of the University address. But, if I did that, you might think that I was delivering “fake news” or “alternative facts” to you.

So, as the title of my remarks this morning suggests, we’ll stick with 13. And as we look back on the successes of 2016-2017 and as we enter the 2017-2018 academic year, I think we have many reasons to believe that we will have a very good year once again.

My optimism is based upon a review of the titles of my Convocation remarks in some recent years, particularly during the depths of the Great Recession. In 2009, it was “When You’re Going Through Hell, Don’t Stop!” In 2010, I talked about “The Importance of Strategy in Stormy Times.” In 2011, “We Have Survived The Cliff: How Do We Avoid The Abyss.” So, inspired by the late gossip columnist Walter Winchell, “if you are chased up a tree by a bear, you might as well enjoy the scenery.” Seriously, we have many reasons to be optimistic.

Last year we celebrated a record enrollment of 28,700 and we have reasons to believe that we’ll approach or top 29,000 students this fall. I want to commend our staffs in Enrollment Management and the Graduate School for their good work to ensure we had a successful recruiting year. The civil unrest in Charlotte last year appeared to depress undergraduate applications at a critical time in the fall, while the national developments of this past spring with respect to immigration most assuredly depressed applications from international students.

Last year we enjoyed a very good budget passed by the General Assembly and, for reasons I will detail in a few minutes, we know that the 2017-2018 budget for us is quite solid and will allow us to continue to hire new faculty and new staff, and to continue to strengthen and build our inventory of academic programs.

Last year our faculty continued their excellent work in instruction, in research and creative activities, and in service to the community. The 2013 Plan for Research Growth developed by Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development Bob Wilhelm and colleagues yielded sponsored
awards of over $50.9 million in Fiscal Year 17, exceeding FY 2016 levels and 80 percent greater than just five years ago.

Individual and institutional recognitions continued to pour in for UNC Charlotte faculty and staff. Provost Joan Lorden was Charlotte’s Woman of the Year. Faculty like Alan Freitag (Communications Studies), Edd Hauser (Transportation Studies), Tanure Ojaide (Africana Studies) Steven Rogelberg (Organizational Science), Murray Webster (Sociology), Mark West (English), and John Ziegert (Mechanical Engineering), among others, were recognized for career achievements from their respective professional societies. In October, I will join Professor Janni Sorensen from the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences in Southern California to accept national recognition of her Charlotte Action Research Project (CHARP) by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) for excellence in civic learning and community engagement. And with our recent institutional recognition by the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) as an “Innovation and Prosperity University,” we became one of just 39 public research universities out of 196 nationwide to hold that designation simultaneously with being a Carnegie Foundation “Community Engaged” university.

Recognitions for our students and alumni also continued to come in, including two undergraduate Goldwater Scholarships, an Ertegun Graduate Scholar to attend Oxford University, and two National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships. Former Board of Trustees Chair Gene Johnson was named as the Outstanding Volunteer fundraiser by the Charlotte Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and awarded The Order of the Long Leaf Pine by former Governor Pat McCrory for his many contributions to North Carolina.

And many of our students excelled in other ways but, most notably, we saw Larry Ogunjobi become the first UNC Charlotte football player to be drafted into the National Football League, while three other UNC Charlotte students were signed as free agents in the NFL draft. Three of these four players go into the pros with their college degrees in hand.

As we move into 2017-2018, we will be able to draw from the enthusiasm and expertise of newcomers to the faculty and staff. As I mentioned earlier, you can see in the list of new faculty and professional staff that we are drawing talent from all over the country and indeed from all around the world.

The nine continuing members of our Board of Trustees, led by Board Chair Joe Price, will be joined by our new SGA President, Tracey Allsbrook, and by newcomers and alumni Dennis Bunker (’82), Brett Keeter (’99), and Teross Young (’93). These additions ensure not only that we will continue to get sound advice concerning the governance and operations of the University from individuals who come from a variety of professional backgrounds, but also that we will benefit from the passion of our graduates who now occupy eight of our thirteen trustee positions (the most in our history).

Our senior administration will include newcomers Kevin Bailey as Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs (hint: Dr. Bailey answers to the name “Bailey”), Fatma Mili as Dean of the College of Computing and Informatics, Mike Mazzola as the Executive Director of the Energy Production and Infrastructure Center (EPIC), Jennifer Walker as Director of Internal Audit, and Sallie Hutton Sistare as Executive Director of Alumni Affairs.
With respect to the campus-wide administration, July 1 marked the beginning of the new Division of Institutional Integrity which combines the functions of Legal Affairs, Internal Audit, Ethics and Compliance, Enterprise Risk Management, and Title IX. Vice Chancellor and General Counsel Jesh Humphrey leads that new Division and will be supported in Legal Affairs by another talented addition to our staff, Samantha Sears, as Deputy General Counsel. This is a unique organization within the UNC system, but it represents our best thinking about how to anticipate, respond to, and mitigate the many risks that universities face today in the complex world of higher education. Or, to put it more pointedly, within the Cato Building, I want people close to me who can best protect me from getting fired or going to jail!

Thanks to the work of President Margaret Spellings and her talented government relations staff, along with our own Betty Doster (my Special Assistant for Constituent Relations), we start the year with an outstanding budget that included full funding for our enrollment growth and no permanent budgetary reductions as we have seen nearly every year I have been in this position. An additional $50 million in one-time funding for repairs and renovations was also approved; the Board of Governors will determine the final allocation to each campus based upon recommendations from President Spellings.

To be sure, there were some proposed changes that we would have liked to see adopted but which were not, including an expansion of our authority to carryforward appropriated funds from one fiscal year to the next (to be used for repairs and renovations) and an expansion of chancellors’ financial authority to approve renovation projects without higher-level review from the current level of $300,000 per project to $1 million. And the General Assembly did impose some additional reporting restrictions with respect to faculty and staff salary increases that are not particularly helpful in terms of ensuring that we can remain nimble and competitive in the marketplace for faculty and administrative staff.

With that said, the General Assembly did fund a $1 million increase in the faculty retention program and provided at least some salary increase funding for both EHRA and SHRA employees. To put the General Assembly’s salary actions in some context, we should remember that, since 2010 in the depth of the Great Recession, no salary increases whatsoever were voted by the General Assembly in five of the fiscal years from 2010 to 2017 (which ended June 30, 2017). The increases approved for this year represent the second year in a row that we have seen salary adjustments, although they may not be what we feel we need or deserve. For that reason, of course, we will continue to look for opportunities to make strategic salary adjustments for employees as our resources permit. As I have said all year, the current year has been identified as a strategic salary adjustment year for our full-time faculty and I have set aside dollars for this purpose from our enrollment increase funding. Of course, we will have to administer those dollars in accordance with the rules and procedures recently adopted by the Board of Governors in response to the General Assembly’s requirements on salary increase reporting.

The funding received for enrollment increases at UNC Charlotte permits us to continue to expand our investment in new academic programs to serve the educational needs of the greater Charlotte region, one of the fastest-growing areas in the nation. This last year we were able to add an important program choice for undergraduate students interested in healthcare with a bachelor’s program in Health Systems Management. At the graduate level, we made additional investments in our Data Science Initiative, secured approval for new master’s programs in Cybersecurity, Management, and Respiratory Care, and have moved forward proposals for master’s programs in Architecture and Athletic Training, and for a doctoral program in Civil Engineering.
This year, we will be examining more closely the idea of adding bachelor’s and doctoral programs in Data Science. We have also begun a conversation with the UNC School of Law in Chapel Hill about some kind of joint graduate-level degree and certificate programs in Legal Studies. Professor Kathleen Nicolaides (Criminal Justice), Professor Tom Barth (Political Science) and University Compliance Director Susan Burgess are representing us in those conversations. We do not envision creating another law school in the state; there is simply no employment market at the moment for students who have earned the J.D. degree. But, with what we expect will be the eventual closure of the Charlotte School of Law, we do think there may be a need for graduate-level programming in Legal Studies for folks in the region who work in government, human resources, or in compliance-related positions in highly-regulated institutions, such as is the case with several employment sectors prominent in our region, most notably financial services, healthcare, and energy.

At the opposite end of the educational continuum, we will use this year to advance some important initiatives related to pre-college education. Our existing Charlotte Engineering Early College (CEEC) will enter its fourth year, with larger numbers of 11th and 12th grade students taking regular University-level coursework as they complete their high school education. Remarkably, 75 students in last year’s 11th grade classes completed an average of 16 college credit hours with an average GPA of 3.2! That is simply a stunning result given that the school’s student body is selected by a random Charlotte-Mecklenburg School (CMS) magnet school lottery selection process, resulting in 66 percent of the students being ethnic minorities, 48 percent coming from economically disadvantaged families, and more than 50 percent being first-generation college students. Notably, the CMS 2017 Teacher of the Year, Deanna Cureton, teaches at CEEC. And of course, we thank our faculty who have welcomed these young students into their classes and supported their success.

We hope to duplicate this success with the Charlotte Teachers Early College (CTEC), a joint initiative of CMS and the Cato College of Education. Dean Ellen McIntyre and her colleagues will welcome up to 55 ninth-graders who think they might have a long-term career goal of becoming teachers. For those of you who work in or near the Education Building, if you begin to think that the students are looking younger and younger each year, your mind will not be playing tricks on you. As far as we know, this model for enlarging the pipeline for new teachers has never been attempted, but we know that it is an absolutely essential experiment given recent declines in the enrollments in teacher preparation programs in the state of North Carolina and nationally.

Our long-term objective is to raise sufficient private funding to seek a state-funded match that will permit us to house both Early College programs on our campus in a permanent facility to be located between the EPIC and Grigg buildings on the CRI campus.

Our other pre-college initiatives flow directly out of the civil unrest that occurred in University City last fall as the result of the police-involved shooting of Keith Lamont Scott and the recent report of The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force. We have asked each of our academic colleges to read the Task Force report and to identify possibilities for the University to take a leadership role in addressing the report’s recommendations, particularly those relating to college and career readiness. We will assess these ideas over the course of the fall semester. Let me mention here that the featured speakers at this year’s annual Dr. Bertha Maxwell-Roddey Distinguished Africana Lecture are the co-chairs of the Opportunity Task Force, Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown and Mr. Dee O’Dell; that event will be held on
September 20 at 5:30 p.m. in McKnight Hall. We look forward to hearing their reflections on how the University can best contribute to improving the lives and opportunities of all citizens in the region.

While we work through the priorities in the Task Force Report that hold the most promise for our involvement, we are continuing conversations with CMS leaders, Central Piedmont Community College, and Charlotte Communities in Schools about the development of a pilot program in early outreach with 7th and 8th graders in two CMS middle schools. The goal of such early outreach would be to help these young students and their parents envision a future for themselves that would include post-secondary education after high school.

We will also continue the development of our Civic Action Plan, the centerpiece of which is likely to be a new initiative, The University City Family Zone. Led by Professor Mark DeHaven of UNC Charlotte’s College of Health and Human Services, the UCity Family Zone initiative will bring together a number of community partners to develop and then implement a strategic development plan to address the most critical educational, housing, health, and economic needs of the UCity community. All of us remember that the civil unrest that resulted from the Scott shooting originated only a short distance from the campus. As the anchor institution in University City, we have a solemn obligation to address the quality of life for all the citizens in our neighborhood.

No annual report from me would be complete without a reference to our ongoing program of capital construction and renovation, with more than $1.2 billion invested since 2005. This year will be no different, with construction starting on the Health and Wellness Center, the Student Union Parking Deck Expansion, and the Undergraduate Admissions Center. Major renovation projects include the Denny Building, other academic facilities in the campus core, and our older residence halls and the old Residence Dining Hall (RDH). Next month we begin renovation of Belk Plaza where the Belk Tower once stood, with the goal of finishing Phase I of that project by next spring. Over the life of our 2016-2020 Capital Construction Plan, $340 million from various sources will be invested, including the $90 million approved in the NC Connect Bond Measure approved by voters in March of 2016. Construction on the Science Building is scheduled to begin in September of 2018, with completion two years thereafter.

Over the last year or so, folks in our great state have spent a whole lot of time talking about bathrooms. I, for one, would be perfectly content to never again speak of HB2. However, I do want to note that we will continue to build Family Style Accessible Unisex Restrooms in new facilities and to retrofit older buildings to ensure we have these kinds of facilities available for anyone who chooses to use them. We have 23 such restrooms now and 6 more in various stages of design or construction.

As we continue to work on our 2016-2020 capital plan, it is not too early to begin thinking about the five-year plan that will follow it. We know already that we have some older buildings that will need attention including, most notably, the Cone Center and Burson. Others—including Cameron, Friday, King, McEniry, Reese, and Smith—are coming of age as well. Our needs are nearly limitless but our funds are not, so we will need to be prepared to make some hard choices moving ahead.

I know you will be glad to know that dodging orange construction cones and dump trucks will continue to be part of campus life for the foreseeable future. But I will share with you that this year will be particularly challenging with the construction of the Health and Wellness Center and the expansion of the Union Parking Deck, both of which are already underway. When the deck expansion is completed in
May of next year, we will enjoy a net gain of parking spaces in this busy part of campus but, until then, many folks will need to park in one of our more distant parking structures and use the newly enhanced shuttle system. So, be prepared for the challenges; and if you can do so, plan to avoid the morning and afternoon rush hours.

I certainly want to acknowledge that the rise of campus enrollment over the past decade and the continuing adverse impacts that go along with a lot of campus construction and renovation projects have obviously generated a certain level of frustration for members of the campus community at one time or another. Last year, I appointed a task force led by Professor Richard Buttimer, who was then serving as Associate Dean of the Belk College of Business, to review the causes of campus congestion and submit recommendations for consideration. The 34 wide-ranging recommendations of the task force included possible changes in our physical infrastructure and parking system, enhancement of alternative modes of transportation, and changes to campus operations.

I won’t address all of those recommendations here today; you can find a current status report in the Chancellor’s Outbox on the university website (http://chancellor.uncc.edu/office-chancellor/initiatives/campus-congestion-task-force). But one recommendation that has broad consequences for faculty, staff, and students, however, relates to the basic design of the class schedule which was altered about a decade ago to focus on having most classes offered twice a week. Our current schedule was designed to accommodate the growth of our physical plant and to allow more time for travel between far-flung classes. The redesign of Phillips Road and the addition of a shuttle service will allow us to return to a schedule that makes better use of our facilities. Anyone who has been around here on Fridays knows that we have a markedly less-crowded campus. And, quite apart from the issue of congestion, we know that our ability to offer a sufficient number of classes for students and to document for state decision-makers that we are making the most efficient use of our available classrooms are challenged by trying to pack most everything into four days instead of five. So, effective with the fall semester of 2018 (one full year from now), we will move back to a schedule that includes a more robust set of offerings on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, including the use of 50-minute classes from 8 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. Faculty members who want to continue to offer 1 hour and fifteen minute classes on any two-day combination of Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays will have that option available beginning at 2:30 p.m on those days. Provost Lorden will appoint a small group of staff and faculty to develop implementation details.

If you choose to review the information on the task force recommendations, know that many changes will take time to implement and others will be deferred until we can complete critical construction projects and get a better sense of the impact that light rail will have on campus traffic patterns. In that regard, many of you will notice this fall that we are launching our own branded shuttle system, “Niner Transit.” No more powder blue CATS buses carrying advertisements for Queens University and Strayer University! What will be most different about the “Niner Transit” system will be its scheduling, enhanced to make sure that we have a shuttle waiting to move folks getting off or on a light rail train every 7-10 minutes during peak hours. With trains arriving 103 times every day, we cannot realize the benefits of light rail without an efficient shuttle system.

Now, if you don’t want to wait for the shuttle or you have somewhere else to get on campus, this fall will also see the launch of our new bike share program, “Charlotte Wheels,” with an initial allotment of 100 bikes available in 10 locations across campus.
We certainly hope that faculty, staff, and students will take to the option of light rail. As of today, CATS estimates that the trains will start running on campus late this fall or early spring. Starting in the spring semester, each student is being assessed an annual fee of $50 for unlimited rides on light rail, including transfers to and from any form of CATS public transportation, including express routes and the CATS airport shuttles. Faculty and staff will also have the option to purchase an unlimited all-access pass for $75. In all cases, your UNC Charlotte ID card will carry the transportation app to ensure that you can simply tap the ticket validators on each train and get to your destination without purchasing a ticket at the station platform.

Turning to another topic, the upcoming 2017-18 year will be a pivotal year for “Exponential: The Campaign for UNC Charlotte,” the largest private fundraising campaign in our history. The public phase of this $200 million effort was announced last September on the occasion of our 70th anniversary as an institution. With just three years remaining in the Campaign, we need to push toward our goal, knowing that we have raised slightly more than $140 million to date. This year’s effort will be focused on securing gifts and pledges from faculty and staff, including our retirees. Professor Jeffrey Leak of the Department of English has agreed to chair an energetic group of ten active and retired faculty and staff colleagues who will lead the campaign.

Each among us, of course, needs to decide whether they will participate and at what level. Any gift pledged can be paid out over time and via payroll deduction. Of course, I can certainly understand that some folks may not want to give anything for one reason or another, including the feeling that they “give every day at the office” or because their salary doesn’t reflect their years of dedicated service. Most of you know that our campus has done more than any other UNC campus to address salary market and equity issues, but there remains no doubt that our salaries could always be better. With that said, if you are approached by Jeffrey or one of his committee members and are tempted to utter the words “over my dead body,” know that we can certainly accept estate gifts as well! Seriously, a proven maxim of University fundraising is that private donors are more inclined to invest in us if they see us investing in the students, in the academic programs, and in the co-curricular experiences we say that we want them to support.

Let me conclude with some observations about campus life last year and what we might expect in the upcoming year. Certainly there is no question that local and national issues last year impacted the campus, whether we are talking about the civil unrest and protest activity in Charlotte that followed the shooting of Mr. Scott or local reactions to debate over national immigration and security policies.

For our part, we will continue to implement the provisions of our revised Plan for Diversity, Access, and Inclusion, including our decision made last spring to develop a Council on University Community Working Group to help raise the visibility, coordination, and impact of our efforts. The Working Group, led by a Faculty Fellow, will advise the Provost and the other vice chancellors who constitute the Council on University Community, on how resources, policies, and practices related to diversity can best be aligned to achieve the goals of our plan.

Certainly one of the things we learned last year was that many folks on and off campus are not aware of our diversity-related programs or do not understand the progress that has been made. Accordingly, we will soon launch a diversity landing page on the campus website that will provide a new channel of communication about the Diversity Plan and its objectives.
We will also work more forcefully to set expectations within the campus community about how we will respond to incidents or actions on campus that do violence to our values. Above all, we seek to sustain a campus culture where our differences are celebrated as part of a vigorous intellectual community committed to academic freedom, robust debate, and dialogue exercised in an environment of mutual respect. That includes support both for peaceful protest and the rights of individuals or groups to say or do things that some might find offensive, objectionable, or hurtful. When a student decided last year to post a Nazi flag in his residence hall window, we used that incident as an opportunity both to protect his free speech rights as provided by decisions of the United States Supreme Court, but also to have a conversation with that student to help him fully understand the true impact of displaying a symbol that embraced a history of hatred and genocide. His voluntary decision to remove the flag from his window spoke volumes about the power of an educational opportunity when exercised at the appropriate time.

For those of you who have known me over the years I’ve served as chancellor, you know that I will never advocate for administrative policies or practices that inhibit free and transparent discourse. To paraphrase Justice Lewis Brandeis, the best way to respond to speech containing ideas we find objectionable is with more speech expressing the ideals we cherish. With that said, we reserve our prerogative to condemn in a public way any behavior or any expression of speech that runs counter to our values as reflected in our Statement of University Vision and Values (http://chancellor.uncc.edu/office-chancellor/mission-strategy-administrative-principles). And, of course, we reserve the right to take appropriate disciplinary action in those rare cases when speech is used in such a way that it conveys no constitutionally protected idea (e.g., profane or obscene utterances), provokes or encourages violence, or constitutes a face-to-face and threatening verbal assault of one person upon another (http://legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-503). Obviously, and importantly, it is critical for the members of my administration who oversee our employee relations and our student affairs to bring a full understanding of the context and circumstances of such situations before disciplining individuals for something they said or did.

I will note here that UNC Charlotte recently received a “green light” from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which is a free speech watchdog group in Philadelphia. Our upgraded rating comes thanks to policy changes we’ve made to better protect free speech on our campus. In case you’re keeping score, we are now one of five “green light” campuses in the state, and one of just 32 (out of more than 400 universities reviewed) across the nation to have received this rating.

As I mentioned at the outset of my remarks, I remain truly optimistic about our future together and the continuation of an affirming campus culture that for many decades has embraced the productive discussion of ideas, collaboration, and collegiality. It is in that spirit that I thank you for your attention this morning.