

“Holding Each Other Accountable: A Family Conversation”

Charlie Nelms, Chancellor

2007 Fall Convocation

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**Hold Fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.**

**Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with Snow.**

-Langston Hughes

Good Morning! Thank you Provost Jones for that wonderful introduction. As one of the newest members of the Eagle’s Nest, words cannot adequately convey just how pleased I am to finally be home. You see, it has taken me 40 years to get here. As student body president of a small, historically black college in Arkansas in 1967, I decided I wanted to be a college president because I just knew I could run the university better than those who were doing so at my alma mater. Little did I know! As forces greater than myself aligned, my career took me to places I never knew existed, let alone were possible for me to be a part of. So here I stand today before those assembled to proclaim that I am delighted to be an Eagle, rather than a Hossier, an Eagle rather than a lion, panther and wolverine combined!

I realized it is a longstanding tradition for the Chancellor of North Carolina Central University to give a “state-of-the university” address at the Fall Convocation. Having been Chancellor for only eight weeks, I do not feel fully qualified at this time to speak authoritatively about the state of the university. Suffice it to say, the state of the university is steady but improving.

When I spoke to the university family on August 13, I indicated that student success would be the cornerstone of my tenure as the 10th chancellor of North Carolina Central University. In those remarks, I stressed the importance of creating a culture of success anchored by five bolts:

- 1) High expectations that are clearly articulated and reinforced;
- 2) High levels of student engagement and personal responsibility;
- 3) High quality, learner-centered instruction;
- 4) High quality student and academic support services delivered by caring employees; and
- 5) High quality, responsive, timely, and consistent administrative support services.

A week later at the Freshman Eagle Pinning Ceremony, I talked about the difference between turkeys and eagles. Many of you may have been in attendance that Sunday afternoon. Let's review for a moment. I reminded the new eagles that:

“Eagles soar higher than any other bird, fly faster than any other bird and can reach the ultimate height of an airplane. I am told that the eagle is the only thing that can fly higher. In human terms – where you end up is more important than where you start!

An eagle is resilient, agile, strong, fast...

An eagle's nest is not on the ground.

Rather it is perched up high away from predators. In fact, predators endanger themselves trying to get to the young eagles. In human terms, Ben Mays said it best, “low aim is sin, not failure.”

The acuity of the eagle's vision is unparalleled. It sees beyond the visible, beyond the horizon. Unlike other birds, the eagle can survive in a diverse array of environmental conditions and locations – the plains as well as the forests. In human terms, excel where you find yourself!

Since this first university convocation affords me the opportunity to set the tone for my tenure; and I will not have this opportunity again, I decided that rather than recite

the accomplishments of the university during the past year, I would use this time in a different way.

As some of you may have heard, I am from a very large family – there was a total of eleven children in my home. Growing up, I recall occasional family meetings to make sure we were on one accord on a number of issues. As we became adults and pursued our careers and raised our families, our parents grew older and more dependent on us and so we resumed our family meetings to talk about what we needed to do to ensure their care and comfort and who would do what. There were things we talked about just between ourselves – with no one else in attendance.

In the brief time that I have been at NCCU, I would estimate that I have spoken to or interacted with hundreds of people, individually and in groups. Knowing that there would be visitors in attendance, I debated with myself how much I wanted to say about our business in their presence. I concluded that no matter how many visitors we have in attendance, there are some things I need to say based on my observations and interactions to date. Thus, I titled my remarks “*Holding Each Other Accountable: A Family Conversation*.” If we are to succeed at graduating more students and achieving new levels of excellence and responsiveness, we must assume more of a family or team approach. Eagle Family, if we are to achieve the vision articulated by our founder, Dr. James E. Shepard, and reinforced by the university leaders who followed him and preceded me, we must do five (5) things:

- 1) Create a stronger sense of community between the various constituent groups of the university. This stronger sense of community must be built on mutual respect, trust, communication and collaboration. To create the level of community of which I speak, we must cross the superficial boundaries that we define as students, faculty, staff

and administration. A true community can only exist when we acknowledge and celebrate those characteristics that define us as human beings, not a set of vectors that place us in “categories of convenience”. The community of which I speak requires us to commit to building a culture of caring where we take time to speak and to ask how I may help you. It requires that we not confuse the availability of loads of information with better communication!

2) We must raise expectations for ourselves – individually, collectively and institutionally. True excellence is race neutral. The excellence of which I speak transcends disciplinary or cultural boundaries. True excellence can only be achieved when we let go of the qualifiers or past limitations that too often define the expectations we have for ourselves and others. We want NCCU to be the best public liberal arts college in the Southeast, not the best HBCU. Benjamin E. Mays said, “Low aim is sin, not failure.” Jim Collins said, “Good is the enemy of Great”.

We must raise expectations.

- a) Admissions requirements
- b) Retention and persistence levels
- c) Graduation levels
- d) Job performance and
- e) Classroom performance

We must stop excusing poor performance wherever it occurs: in a campus office, the classroom, the residence halls or in laboratories!

3) Restore the verdant greens – I am told that back in the day the beauty of this campus was one of its most defining characteristics. The rolling hills and topographical bowls were stunning. There was a freshman bowl, sophomore bowl, etc.

The cleanliness of the campus is really based on the respect we have for the university. Respect for the verdant greens would not let us throw paper or plastic bottles on the

ground; walk on the grass just to save a few steps; leave paper on the floor of a classroom just because we didn't place it there; respect for these hallowed walls and halls will not let us spray paint graffiti on them...Appearance matters, and we each have a role to play. Our university can never hire enough grounds people or custodians to create and maintain the level of beauty that will uplift our spirits and be a source of pride for future generations of students and alumni. So, I have a proposal for you today. I want to challenge you to **adopt a block**...If you live in Eagleson, adopt that block around Eagleson. If you have an office in the Criminal Justice Building, faculty members adopt that space. If you're in the law school or business school, adopt that space. If we all do that imagine the greenery and blossoms that will come alive. That's my challenge to you.

4) Improve the quality of service at all levels of the university. Poor service, rude service, disrespectful service is never ok and must be buried today and replaced with new skill sets, attitudes and determination. Voice mail, nor e-mail was ever intended as a way to avoid human interaction....If you don't like people, you may want to re-think your career! Because NCCU is in the business of educating students to learn, live and lead in the global world. Today, I am pleased to announce the establishment of the North Carolina Central University Quality Service Program (QSP). QSP is designed to create and sustain a respectful, responsive and encouraging environment for students, faculty and staff, which will lead to greater retention and graduation rates. The QSP will help NCCU create a workforce that is responsive to the needs of both internal and external constituents by:

- Increasing the proficiency of NCCU employees in the areas of quality service delivery by offering a variety of training courses focused on quality service skills.
- Identifying behaviors that enhance quality service;

- Creating expectations by internal and external customers that NCCU employees will Deliver quality service at a consistently high level.

The program is sponsored by the Chancellor's Office, financed through a Title III grant. It will be directed by Mrs. Judith Bell. Those of us who provide services that support the mission of the university will be required to participate in the training. I am pleased to say that the Chancellor and members of the Chancellor's Cabinet will be the first group of participants. Ultimately, this group is responsible for service levels on campus. Yes, there are incentives and disincentives associated with the program. Service is more about skills and attitudes than it is about money!

5). We must look within ourselves for solutions to increasing the levels of excellence and responsiveness to which we aspire. The solutions we need individually, collectively and institutionally lie within each of us, not in some office with a long or short name, inhabited by people with a title that sounds more important than it really is.

I realize that this is not your typical State of the University address one would expect to hear. However, we must re-think a wide array of non-fiscal and facility issues if we are to achieve the aspirations that we have for ourselves and for our University. We must create a culture of caring and a culture of success based on mutual respect, collective responsibility and individual accountability.

Hold fast to dreams!