Good morning and welcome to the start of the 2014 – 2015 academic year! Welcome back to those of you who have been away this summer. It has been a busy summer here on campus. And, the pace has noticeably quickened as we have been busy preparing for the opening of the year. The atmosphere of excitement is growing as our students begin their move to Keene. A new year is upon us and our future is bright. This will be a year of setting our sights on a vision for Keene State College 15 years out. Together we will chart the first five-year course to advance us toward that vision.

Let me start with a few introductions. Will our new faculty and staff – those who were hired since the last opening day on August 20, 2013 - please stand. Welcome. You join a dedicated workforce and a caring community. One in which we hope you thrive and continue your own professional development.

Let me also ask Kemal Atkins, Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, and Walter Zakahi, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, to stand. Please join me in welcoming them and I encourage you to make an effort to introduce yourselves.

It my distinct honor to recognize the next Distinguished Teacher of the Year. This award, given by our Alumni Association, recognizes excellence in teaching, the encouragement of independent thinking, rapport with students in and out of the classroom, and effective advising. Would Dr. Prudence Cooper please stand. Dr. Cooper provides us with an exemplary model of the power of teaching and mentoring. Please join me in hearty
congratulations for Pru, the 2014 Alumni Distinguished Teacher of the Year.

I would also like Gordon Leversee to stand and be recognized. Gordon, I can’t thank you enough for stepping in as interim provost. I greatly appreciate your steadiness, your candor, your counsel, and your sense of humor. You have served Keene State College well over a long period of time and if I’m right, this was your third time as interim provost. That’s a badge that few wear. Thank you, Gordon.

From my vantage point, the 2013 – 2014 year was an excellent one. While there were some bumps along the way, and to be sure, we were tested by the unexpected, we came through this past year well, and we are poised for another good year ahead. I continue to see a future that is bright, a community that is hopeful, and an educational institution that is not only the jewel among the institutions of University System of New Hampshire, but among public liberal arts colleges across the country. In fact, support from the Board of Trustees for our College and its mission is very, very strong. We have much to celebrate, brag about, and take rightful pride in. And as I have said in many venues this past year, all of that is testimony to the dedication, commitment, and hard work of each and every one of you. You are the primary stewards of Keene State College, and your passion for our students’ education, their welfare, and their personal development, make us special and contribute to an inviting and transformational educational environment. Let’s look at a few examples that demonstrate this, knowing that I could fill the entire day with accolades and thanks and endless stories of your accomplishments.

Let me start with our faculty by thanking you for what you do in and out of the classroom to provide a rich learning environment, to engage our students deeply in learning, and to challenge them to achieve their personal
best in the pursuit of knowledge. You are a talented group of faculty-scholars as evidenced by these examples.

Jim Waller, Cohen Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, was named a Centennial Senior Ethics Fellow by the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

Alice B. Fogel, lecturer in the English Department and writer, who works to make poetry accessible to all readers, was named the New Hampshire Poet Laureate.

Jerry Jasinski, Professor of Chemistry, was the third Keene State professor to be named a Fulbright Scholar.

Continuing with that theme, Paul Vincent, Professor and Chair of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, has been named a 2014-2015 Fulbright Scholar.

Jamie Landau, Assistant Professor of Communication, received the President’s Good Steward Award from Campus Compact for New Hampshire.

James Stemp, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, is the 2014 recipient of the Faculty Distinction in Research and Scholarship Award.

Again, these are but a few of many, many examples of the excellence and quality of our faculty.

The staff, operating and professional, continues to amaze and impress me. I have worked for four other colleges and universities and I can tell you, your dedication and service have exceeded all of my expectations. You are really the heart of making it all work. You’re the ones that come to work in the wee hours to clear the snow, you keep the lights on, the fans spinning, the plumbing working, and the locks in good order. The quality of our
grounds is a frequent compliment I hear from many visitors. And let’s not forget all the moving of boxes and furniture, set up and take down that happens on a daily basis somewhere here on campus.

What about the dozens of people who orchestrate and plan our celebrations like graduation and the honors convocation, spearheaded by Barbara Preston, Pat Hitchner, and others? Our campus safety officers work to maintain a safe environment and at the same time encourage our students to make good choices. Our secretaries and administrative assistants really are the ones that keep us all on track. And I want to give a special shout out to our enrollment management team. On Wednesday we welcome the largest entering class since 2008. Interest in Keene State College has never been higher than it was this past year. Thanks to the recruiters, the financial aid counselors, the admissions team, student accounts, and academic and career advising. It’s a job well done. Our colleagues in the budget office have done a great job of closing out the FY14 books and getting FY15 underway. And finally, I’d like to thank everyone who worked to bring the College’s master plan to its successful conclusion. As with our faculty, these are but a few examples. The list of excellence in service from our staff is long and something of which I am deeply proud.

This has also been a year that has increased and built on our reputation for excellence. Witness our taking a leadership role in the American Democracy Project’s *Action Series* initiative focusing on economic inequality under the leadership of Dr. Patrick Dolenc, Professor of Economics.

For five consecutive years Keene State College has been named the top New England Division III public institution in the Learfield Sports Directors’ Cup standings and for 13 consecutive years we have earned the Little East Conference Commissioner’s Cup as the most successful athletic program in the conference. In addition, our athletic program was awarded
the President’s Cup for the highest conference grade point average, and the retention rates for athletes at the College are consistently higher than those of the general student population. Congratulations to our coaches.

Students and faculty from Keene State College have been traveling across the globe to conduct research and broaden their understanding of cultural diversity. Students traveled to Rwanda twenty years after the country experienced one of the worst genocides in history. Additional faculty/student research trips were made to South Africa, Nepal, and Panama.

Several members of the Keene State College community were recent guests on New Hampshire Public Radio broadcasts. Anne Miller, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs, appeared on NHPR’s weeklong series, “A Matter of Degrees,” where she discussed what it means to be college ready. Dr. Kristen Porter-Utley, Associate Professor of Biology, contributed to a segment on attracting students to STEM programs. Dr. Dottie Morris, Chief Officer of Diversity and Multiculturalism, participated in a panel discussion on how the topic of race is discussed in New Hampshire. And, poet and adjunct faculty member Rodger Martin was interviewed on NHPR Arts and Culture as part of the station’s celebration of National Poetry Month.

Keene State College enjoyed significant, positive visibility through press coverage and social media during the past year. The campus was included in approximately 400 news stories and covered by approximately 39 international, national, regional, and local media outlets. Content featured Keene State faculty and staff as subject experts; research stories highlighting Keene State faculty and staff; content contributed by Keene State faculty and staff; recovery of the lost Mary Pickford film, and the TDS Center LEED Platinum certification. Over the past year, followers of
Keene State College’s Facebook page increased by more than 1500 with 10,623 “likes.” And, we have more than 2400 followers on Twitter.

Important good news as we enter this new academic year includes the state of our financial health primarily as a result of strong enrollment. Giving to the college was up 17% primarily in scholarship gifts. We have Board approval for a new residence hall which will allow us to de-triple our first year students and in turn have a positive impact on first-year retention. And the unanimous approval by the Board of Trustees for the College’s facilities master plan sets the stage for a future state appropriation to support the Media Arts Technology Center, likely in the 2nd biennium.

This brings me to the core message that I want to share with you today. Ours is a strong, vibrant history with a legacy that points to innovation, agility, a commitment to access, and a rich, robust educational program that is built on a highly interactive, highly residential student experience that prepares our graduates for evolving careers and civic engagement. Based on this legacy I believe we have the building blocks to succeed in securing Keene State College’s future for generations of students to come. I have assembled the team that will ensure that we honor our legacy as a liberal arts college while leading us in the creation of a strategic plan to take us on a pathway of excellence as a preeminent liberal arts college for the 21st century.

Let’s talk about how we’re going to get there. We will get there with renewed and ongoing commitment to academic quality and civic engagement, an emphasis on diversity and strengthening the community’s engagement with the campus. Importantly, we will get there if and only if you participate and engage in the spirit of shared stewardship.
You heard me talk throughout last year about approaching our work together with shared stewardship. I believe each of us as individuals has an obligation to be stewards of the education of Keene State College students. And, that the whole of our efforts is so much greater than anything we could accomplish individually. In my opening remarks today I reminded you that you are the primary stewards of Keene State College. In saying this I remind us all that we have an obligation to be fully committed to actualizing the College’s goals and objectives in the work we do every day. And central to this is a sharp focus on the success of our students.

In my inauguration address I talked about this chapter in Keene State College’s history. I offered that this chapter will deepen our engagement in this community, our state, our nation and beyond; a chapter that will anticipate the learner of the 21st century and meet the demands of a changing workforce; and a chapter that will be marked by excellence in all that we do. And, in my opinion, more than any other era in our history, this chapter will require us to choose wisely as our journey will present choices requiring decisions that will either advance our path or stall our progress. Those very choices will be the difference between the path to excellence and the slide to mediocrity.

I also talked about the reality that being good at what we do will not be good enough to thrive in this increasingly competitive space. I said that we must pursue excellence. That we must be bold in our aspirations and entrepreneurial in spirit. That we must develop the appetite for calculated risk and the courage to let go of the things in which we cannot excel in order to invest in our core mission – the education of our students in the classroom, on the playing fields, in the residence halls, in the community, on the stage, in our research laboratories, and in the experiences that engage them deeply in learning. And importantly, that we must become more nimble and develop capacity by working smarter with greater efficiency and effectiveness.
We must pay attention to the very real challenges facing higher education today. Our mission as a residential, highly engaged, liberal arts college sits in the most competitive space in the higher education landscape. This requires that we differentiate ourselves; that we invest in excellence; that we contain costs; and that we shed those things that are not core to this mission or that we cannot do to the level of excellence that will be required.

And then I called you to action asking you to join me on this journey and to believe that we can achieve our goals. Your participation will be what creates a bold and aspirational vision for this chapter of our history. And, it is essential to ensuring the enduring nature of our College and its capacity to thrive despite devastating economic times and unprecedented challenges before us. Every person in this room has an important role to play in the success of our students. Each and every one of you has a stake in the success of our students and if we are able to focus and integrate our efforts horizontally across the college we will have achieved a milestone that will move us toward being a preeminent liberal arts college for the 21st century.

Today marks the beginning of the creation of a strategic plan to take us to that future. It starts with articulating our vision and stating our values. What is our vision for the liberal arts college of the 21st century 15 to 20 years from now? And once we have that, what road will take us there and how will we know when we get there? Articulating a vision statement and a clear set of values will set us up for developing the first five-year strategic plan on the road to that vision. The strategic plan is our path to excellence and it will hone our brand and enhance our competitive edge. The foundation for our vision rests on being that liberal arts college for the 21st century and it shows how we provide a distinctive, relevant, and engaging liberal arts education. Importantly, this plan will also articulate college-wide learning outcomes commensurate with that education.
The process that is envisioned begins with crafting a vision statement, articulating our values related to that vision, conducting an environmental scan, and arriving at three to five priorities for the next five years. This will not be a top down process. The leadership of the college will guide and support the process but it necessarily must be led by the key stewards of our College, you. And I should say at the outset that strategic planning is messy by its nature and we need to be comfortable with the mess and ambiguity as part of the process. What I mean by that is as we set the course for our future we will debate many things. What will our focus be? How will we achieve that focus? What are we prepared to do in order to move from stable to sustainable? How will we pursue excellence?

We will necessarily have to create the atmosphere and space for civil discourse and debate. An atmosphere that values and seeks opinions from others; that invites broad participation; and that allows for constructive debate without silencing voices. It is that very debate that will ensure that a strong, vibrant plan emerges at the end of this process. George Washington published rules of civility and these are captured in a book with the same title written by John T. Phillips, II. I think the first rule captures the essence of all the rules that followed. “Let all actions performed in public show some sign of respectful sentiment to the entire company.” In Forni’s book “Choosing Civility,” he talks about the twenty-five rules of considerate conduct. He reminds us that civility is complex and that whatever form it takes, it has to do with courtesy, politeness, and good manners. Civility encourages the sharing of perspectives.
If you tie this back to shared stewardship, we realize that if we each have a responsibility to the success of our students and we commit ourselves to planning for the future, it is necessary that we debate with civility what that is. I want to challenge you to encourage debate throughout this process and to work to ensure that the opinions of everyone are voiced and considered.

Related to civility comes our obligation to ensure that our students have an environment that is respectful of them and supportive of their learning and personal development. Regardless of the setting, the classroom, the residence halls, the student union, or athletic fields, it is our responsibility to maintain healthy, appropriate relationships with students. We will be spending time this year reviewing, examining, and strengthening our policies and practices that maintain this healthy environment, as well as training and educating ourselves to recognize potential issues and deal with them appropriately.

We cannot talk about the future, excellence, and vision, without talking about diversity. The world has changed and we need to catch up. Diversification is the act of intentionally incorporating multiple cultural perspectives within an organization when making decisions, conducting business (internally and externally), and creating an environment that supports innovation. We cannot achieve this if we do not accelerate our efforts to recruit and retain a diverse faculty, staff, and student body. Yet, while this is necessary it is not sufficient. We must prepare our environment to be welcoming and supportive of cultural perspectives that accompany diversity. In order to engage in effective cross-cultural dialogue, offer transformative educational opportunities, and create an environment rich in diversity, many voices from diverging perspectives must be represented in the community. Wherever our path takes us a sharp focus on strengthening this at Keene State College will be required to be that preeminent liberal arts college for the 21st century.
While we spend much of this year planning we must prepare to implement the plan and to invest our resources in the priorities that emerge from it. To accomplish this we need a common basis for understanding where we are today, what our gaps are, and how we might create capacity from within our human capital and financial resources. In order to achieve this we will undertake two important activities. One, a human capital inventory – how are our assets deployed today and where do we have gaps? Two, a focused effort to redesign select business operations to uncomplicate our processes, reduce unnecessary workload, and free up resources – human and monetary – to invest in advancing our vision. I hope that you will see this as an empowering opportunity with permission to explore ideas, propose strategies, and strengthen our organization.

In closing, let me come back to where I started and share my enthusiastic optimism for our future, my gratitude for what you do every day to make this a better place, and my confidence that we are coming off of a strong year and moving into another with every reason to believe that this year will be even better. And, while we haven’t yet written our vision, stated our values clearly, or developed our first five-year strategic plan, I do know that the epilog on this chapter in Keene State’s history will read that shared stewardship, bold aspiration, and an entrepreneurial spirit, brought Keene State College to an extraordinary level of quality; that we met our challenges with courage; that we conducted ourselves with integrity; and that we operated with transparency in an environment of civility and with a great sense of trust in each other.