Good morning and welcome to the start of the 2015 – 2016 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. In fact some of our students have already joined us – our Resident Assistants, athletes and Orientation Leaders. This is the year to identify and overcome barriers to our success, to bring our strategic plan to life, and to invest in our future.

Let me start with a few introductions. Will our new faculty please stand and be recognized. And will the staff that were hired since the last opening day on August 18, 2014 please stand and be recognized. Welcome. You join a dedicated workforce and a caring community. One in which we hope you thrive and continue your own professional development. I invite you to discover all that Keene State College has to offer.

It is my distinct honor to introduce 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. Chris Cusack, Professor of Geography, please stand. Dr. Cusack provides us with an exemplary model of connecting with students, bringing out their best, and preparing them for success in life and fulfilling careers. Nominators also credit him with outreach to alumni and helping increase the number of geography majors significantly during his tenure. Please join me in hearty congratulations for Chris, the 2015 Alumni Distinguished Teacher of the Year.

Jay, please join me. You have dedicated the last 27 years of your career to Keene State College. And you have gone all in, heart and soul. Your service has been steadfast, your effort tireless and your loyalty to the campus and the community unwavering. It’s a little daunting to ponder the shoes you leave behind for us to fill. I chose the picture you’re seeing right now (Jay at the construction site of the TDS Building) because, although Jay will leave a legacy of accomplishment for many things, I believe that legacy is strongest and most lasting with respect to his vision for and impact upon Keene State’s facilities, grounds, and overall campus footprint – his ongoing leadership in ensuring the College remained attractive and safe – even during lean fiscal times – has been his focus and we cannot thank him enough for it. We will pay tribute to Jay in multiple forums in the coming months. In the meantime, be sure to make the effort when you see him to express your gratitude for all he’s done. Jay, thank you.

Every time I have the opportunity to walk along Appian Way and talk with you I am reminded that your dedication is what has kept this college moving forward during lean times. I am so very appreciative of the work that everyone does. I know that for the last several years you have worked in an environment of fewer resources and that this has produced anxiety and affected morale. We need to look for solutions that reduce that stress and create the capacity to rebuild our employee numbers.

Our faculty is a distinguished and talented group of teacher-scholars. While there isn’t sufficient time to recognize each of you individually, I thought I would point to a few examples that provide evidence of excellence among our ranks.
Professor of Education Len Fleischer was on sabbatical in Nepal on April 25, 2015, when the earthquake struck. After the earthquake, he switched his attention to the relief effort and returned this summer, doing counseling and training teachers and administrators in sustainable resilience. Professor of Environmental Studies, Renate Gebauer is also very involved.

Assistant Professor of Management Emily Porschitz was added to the Union Leader’s 2015 “40 Under 40” list, an annual selection recognizing 40 New Hampshire individuals who are under 40 years of age and who contribute significantly to their field, community, or to the state.

Paul Vincent, Professor and Chair of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, while serving as a Fulbright Scholar in Krakow, was invited to address the Senate of the Czech Republic on the end of World War II.

Renate Gebauer, Associate Professor and Head of Special Collections and Archives in Mason Library, was appointed by Governor Hassan to the New Hampshire State Historical Records Advisory Board.

Patrick Dolenc, Professor of Economics, recently received a national award, the Barbara Burch Award for Faculty Leadership in Civic Engagement, from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, for his role in establishing the new Economic Inequality Initiative.

Associate Professor of Health Science Meg Henning was awarded the Marion and Jasper Whiting Foundation award to develop a stronger connection between Keene State College’s only African study away site with a Public Health/Community Health focus.

Assistant Professor of Film Jo Dery had one of her animated films featured in the New York Times.

Again, these are but a few of many, many examples of the excellence and quality of our faculty. Yet they highlight what is true, that the reach of our faculty and this College is global.

Our staff, operating, professional, and technical, are also accomplished and you continue to inspire me with your dedication and commitment to our students.

Ralph Stuart, Chemical Hygiene Officer in the Physical Plan, received the Tillmanns-Skolnick Award at the American Chemical Society’s Division of Chemical Health and Safety meeting.

Rick Rumba, Project Director of WorkWISE, and his team were featured in articles in New Hampshire Business Review and the Keene Sentinel; team members include Matthew Hardy, Brady Keene, Teresa Ferrara, and Brenda Clark.

Casey Wilson, Coordinator of First Year Residential Experience, and her team helped reinstate June Orientation for first year students.

Kristen Sweeney, Trio Grant Director, and her team succeeded in getting the TRIO Grant renewed for another five years.

I also want to acknowledge and thank all the trades in Physical Plant for keeping our campus not only operational and safe – even during a brutal winter – but beautiful. Along these lines, we are grateful to Campus Safety for keeping the campus community secure. And, where would we be without all the administrative assistants, business services assistants, and technical staff? They make sure our offices
function smoothly and move forward day to day, and they also interact frequently with our students and contribute significantly to their sense of well-being and success.

In particular, I want to commend and express my gratitude to all the staff members who worked during and in the aftermath of the events of October 18th, despite being traumatized themselves by what happened in our community. The list is vast, from those on the front line during the weekend itself, to those who worked to repair the damage to our campus and city as well as to our relationship with the larger community. Untold hours went into handling calls and visits from students, parents, and others, and I know firsthand how many of you took on additional workload because of these events. You prove that when we come together as one community we can handle difficult situations.

I have reflected often this past year on what drew me here to you, our students, and this community. I was struck during my interview by how deeply passionate you were by about KSC; I was also struck by the concern you expressed for our College and its challenges, as well as the tensions among yourselves that are embedded in a strong desire to be appreciated for what you do no matter your position at the College.

That has stayed with me as I have provided a vision to take us forward. I came here because I believe in our mission, I am committed to the students we serve and the impact we have on them, their futures, their hopes and their dreams, and I care about New Hampshire – I grew up here, I am a product of public higher education, I am a first generation college student, and my education at the University of New Hampshire opened the door to opportunities I might otherwise not have had. I bring to my work at Keene State College passion and the commitment, courage, and the drive to lead this College to the level of greatness it truly deserves. And that includes the courage to lead our College through a challenging time nationally, in our state, and locally; to ensure that we become the best of what we can be and importantly that we are sustainable and resilient going into the future. Leadership is necessary but not enough. I need you to commit to the journey, to work with me to meet our challenges and overcome the barriers to our success.

I am optimistic about our future and you should be too. We have a long and successful history of overcoming our challenges; ours is an educational experience worth fighting for; we provide the kind of education that so many long for and so few have access to — a highly engaged, face to face, residential experience that focuses on the education of the whole student. We must meet our challenges with courage and commitment to resolving them together and not dividing our efforts. And, let’s remember that our future is built on our past. We are not crafting that future from a blank slate, but rather building it on our successes.

The stated values of this community are ones that guide us in all that we do. Taken selectively, I remind us of three of them. We value all members of our community: students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends; we value strong relationships among students, faculty, and staff; and we value diversity, civility, and respect. These will continue to be our bellwether moving forward and guide us in how we behave toward one another.

As you know, I received an anonymous letter from a group of “concerned faculty.” Normally I would have addressed those concerns directly with the faculty. The fact that the letter was given to the local paper before I had the opportunity to respond caused me to share the letter with all of you. It is also the case that some concerns expressed in that letter have been expressed by some of our staff. We are going to deal with those concerns beginning at 1:30 this afternoon. Plan to join me in the Mabel Brown
Room. We’re going to address those concerns, in person, and forthrightly, with a conversation that will be marked by civility and respect.

The 2014 – 2015 year was difficult and strenuous. In some ways it brought to the forefront challenges that have been difficult for the College for several years. These challenges include enrollment, finances, student behavior, admission standards, communication, relationships among employee groups, and support from the state. I will talk about several of these at our 1:30 meeting. Knowing that it will be somewhat redundant, I think it’s important to touch on a couple of them now.

The riots on October 18th put a laser spotlight on a culture among some of our students that has been ignored for too long. During the past year we have made significant strides in addressing this by creating a balance between holding our students accountable and encouraging their personal accountability to each other. The College/City Commission, that I invited the Mayor to join me in, will issue their report shortly, and it will contain additional recommendations from the Keene community to improve the citizenship of our students. I intend to implement those recommendations as soon as practical.

The personnel changes in athletics have been challenging for me, for the individuals, for our students, for you and the community. None were made lightly, and I shoulder the fallout from those decisions every day. All of them were made with my judgment that our students deserve better than they had been given. The changes give us an opportunity for a new chapter that will be marked by ensuring the integrity of the environment our students live, learn, and compete in. I appreciate that there are many among you who agree and many who don’t. That is a hard reality. To the full extent possible, I have made information available. But now, it’s time to focus our collective energy on healing and rebuilding. Our students are counting on us to do just that.

Our enrollment is a serious concern. Our applications for first time students have been falling for five years and our transfer student enrollment has dropped during the same period. The same trend applies to our first to second year retention rates. And we have on average lost almost eight percent of our entering first year class over the summer. All of this has resulted in a drop in full-time matriculated students over time. This year, the downward trend in applications continued. What changed dramatically and suddenly in late April was our yield rate resulting in a much smaller first-year class. There are important activities underway to address the drop in yield, rebuild our application base, and improve retention. One, the reintroduction of summer orientation appears to have had a very positive impact on summer melt which is approximately four percent. Two, significant additional resources have been added to impact the recruitment of students and refresh our image as a college that values serious academic pursuit. Three, new initiatives focused on transfer students are underway. And four, the initiatives we put in place last year to improve retention appear to moving the dial in the right direction. We need to monitor all of this very closely during the fall and I commit to providing you with timely updates throughout the year.

As a function of enrollment and state support, our revenue is also a significant challenge and one that we will need to monitor closely through the R+30 period to allow us to make adjustments in a timely, nimble fashion. Our priorities will remain maintaining and building as we are able our employee base – faculty and staff – as well as improving to the greatest extent possible the experience of our students. I will be organizing a campus-wide budget group this fall that will help guide decision making and improve transparency.
Where then, you might ask, is the cause for optimism. One, you – I have confidence in your ability to rise to the occasion and work with me to address these challenges. Two, you can’t address serious challenges if you are unwilling to name them and talk about them. We have named them, we know what they are, we understand at least some of the causes, and we are putting solutions into place. Three, our history. This is not the first time that we have had to face adversity. We have a successful track record. And perhaps most importantly, what we do here every day matters. And we do it well. It doesn’t mean it can’t be improved upon, but it does mean that our foundation is solid. And a solid foundation is a requisite for building our future.

The path forward is to stay the course, work through these issues, and carefully and selectively implement those aspects of our strategic plan that will take us forward. Our work for the rest of the morning deals with exactly that issue. The draft plan before us is extensive and reaches well beyond five years. Hence, the importance of refining, reviewing, and prioritizing the recommended strategies contained within the plan.

What’s the strategic plan all about? An examination of this Wordle, drawn from our campus meeting, captures that nicely. It draws out our students, our faculty, our community, our staff, and our campus. It started with you and my listening tour. Among others I asked you two questions. What is in our DNA that must be preserved, and what changes could we make that would make it easier to advance our College?

You told me that the following were in our DNA and needed to be preserved as we move forward. Dedicated staff and faculty; a caring community; our role as part of the City of Keene; the beauty of our campus; the face-to-face interaction with students; our commitment to first generation students; our core mission as a liberal arts college; and our multicultural focus. Much of this is prominent in our strategic plan or underpins it.

And when asked what needed to change you pointed to the following. The complexity of our processes; the locus of decision-making; a desire for permission to be entrepreneurial; an understanding that too few people are trying to do too much; and a longing for an environment that engenders behavior with each other marked by civility and respect. Our strategic plan also takes into account these issues.

You have heard me share my hopes and aspirations for Keene State College. We have the capacity to be a model public liberal arts college for the 21st century. We have a strong history, solid programs, and a tradition of focusing on the development of the whole student. And I have articulated my hopes and aspirations for our College. These include an unwavering focus on the student experience, pursuing excellence, building on the foundation of our successes, fostering a culture that values civility and respect, acknowledging that each of us is a steward of the education of our students, and understanding the importance of being competitive as an excellent liberal arts college that reflects the 21st century learner.

And so we set out to put in place a planning process to examine these and other issues. Over the course of the 2014 – 2015 academic year we held 120 meetings over approximately 125 hours involving approximately 600 participants. We conducted a survey with 932 respondents; we held retreats in December and March and all campus input meetings in January and May.

And that brings us to the path forward and the balance of the morning. We have largely agreed upon goals and objectives. We have an extensive list of strategies that have been recommended based on
campus feedback that addresses the objectives. Our task today is to review those recommendations with the following questions in mind. What’s missing? What should be deleted? What requires refining? And importantly, what should we do first?

We are going to live with, refine, and continue to work with our strategic plan. Following today’s meeting we will share the input gathered and move forward with priorities for year one even as we continue to refine additional strategies.

Thank you for coming this morning. Please stay and engage in the small group discussions about the four goals in our strategic plan.