Good morning! Welcome to another great year at UT Tyler! It looks like we’re set up for a talk show this morning. If that were really the case, this is when I would start my monologue with a joke. But since all mine are for grandchildren and start with either “knock, knock” or “why did the chicken cross the road,” I’ll spare you. Or, maybe not. Here’s one from my grandson Caleb: Why won’t lobsters share their toys with their oyster friends? Because they’re “shellfish.”

Today, we are celebrating the innovation that takes place every day in our classrooms, both physical and virtual. We will cover a lot of ground in a few short minutes, but the most important thing to acknowledge is that not a single step could be taken to make this university the innovative and student-focused special place that it is without your individual enthusiasm, love of students, creativity and plain hard work.

To those here last year, I say “Thank you!” for your dedication. Give yourselves a round of applause for the very successful year you produced in 2012-13. Our enrollment increased when that was not the case for most institutions around us. In fact, from legislative session to legislative session—across those two
years—our official, weighted semester credit hour production increased by more than 10%, the second highest growth rate among the 35 established public universities in Texas.

To our new faculty and staff, let me say that you are in for a treat. UT Tyler is a very special and enjoyable place to work, excel and innovate. We will introduce many of you later, so I’ll simply say “Welcome!” to you, too. We are pleased to have you and hope you enjoy being part of our team.

As you can see behind me, we have a 42-year history as a thriving university. For the new people and the old hands as well, take a look at our brief vision statement. We are indeed a premier institution—one of the very best in Texas and the nation—that is focused on student success. That’s where we excel. Note that the word “innovative” has been added in our vision statement. Our new provost, Dr. Alisa White, asked for that addition because she said it is true of us. I agree. We are not afraid to be innovative. We search for new methods of teaching and doing research. We rapidly adopt successful strategies and do things differently, if that’s what it takes to help our students succeed. We welcome creative and new ideas, and you will hear about
some of our current innovations we are proudest of during this program.

It only takes a quick look around to see that this is a great place to be. Our enrollment is on the rise and the university was ranked in the top 100 universities in the west by U.S. News and World Report.

I am always amazed by what our students, faculty and staff have achieved. As you can see, in the past year our students have excelled in the classroom and on the debate trail; were recognized on the international stage; and gained more than a few victories on the field. It’s worth noting our first NCAA D-III national championship—our men’ golf team. Our women came in second at the national championships in Florida. And, one of our women golfers on that second-place team, Laura Lindsey, became our first individual NCAA champion. She took the women’s golf title, outscoring all others by quite a large margin.

I’ve completed 15 years, and I continue to be amazed by the team of faculty and staff we have at UT Tyler. You are the heart and soul of this university and I am grateful for each one of you. Our
group is passionate about helping students and serving East Texas in so many ways. We educate students and lift the economic and social standard of living of all East Texans. You should give yourselves another round of applause for the difference you make in the lives around you and for caring to build a really great university.

Last year, I came before you with some budget challenges we were facing, and I asked for your patience, continued good nature and continued hard work. Thank you. You did just that.

Now, I can say we got through those major cuts without any layoffs and moved dramatically forward in spite of them. And, I have some very positive financial news for the new year.

On the financial front, that second-highest-in-the-State SCH growth you put up with during the past few difficult years meant our formula funding increased by a greater percentage than any other UT System university. We didn’t get all the cut funds back (the bad news), but the good news is we got a lot of those funds back. In turn, that means we will have decent raises for both
faculty and staff this fall with a merit pool averaging about 3.5%. Yours will be the largest raises among UT System institutions!

And, that’s not all. In addition to those annual performance raises, we will also have salary adjustments for those individuals more than 10% below the median salary for their discipline or area and also exhibit meritorious performance. Thank you for waiting. You will be rewarded.

We are happy that we could give bonuses in the last two years—and we don’t want to forget that we did this to help you when other universities were not—but we are pleased to be in a position to give normal, permanent raises. And, the adjustments are permanent, too, of course, and are just the first part of a plan to get everyone—especially faculty who have fallen behind and staff in high-demand fields—up to a salary that is competitive in the market.

I want to thank all of you, again, because these upcoming raises were made possible through your hard work, especially retention. Those returning students mean a lot to us because we care about their ultimate success—but they also matter greatly to our budget.
If each one of you could work on retention by saving just one student this year—getting them to continue rather than drop out—we would have more than enough new revenue to offer these same raises again next year.

Last year, I talked about several projects on the horizon—and many of those are now becoming an exciting reality.

The largest change will be located next to the library. After a decade of thinking, planning, scheming and prodding, Governor Rick Perry signed SB 566 into law in June. That bill enables the Board of Regents to create a self-sustaining College of Pharmacy at UT Tyler. A dean has been hired, donors have been found to name the new college, and architects are at work designing a new building. We still have a lot of work to do that involves the entire campus, but we are moving forward and the pharmacy school will soon be a reality. We will tell you more about this later in the program.

Other very important initiatives listed last year are finished or closer to reality.
• The Graduate nursing program has moved back to a new $3 million addition to the Braithwaite Nursing Building.
• The biology addition has been completed, although at least two labs are shelled.
• PATSS is underway, our $8 million program to advance learning through hybrid courses on campus. More in a moment on that.
• UT Tyler’s new Engineering Center in cooperation with Houston Community College is underway with 50+ students. They will save about $25,000 getting their degrees in this 2+2 format over going to a traditional university engineering program. Thank you Dean Jim Nelson.
• The Faculty-Alumni House is on its way and will go into design phase this fall—we received an anonymous commitment for $1.5 million for the lead gift towards the $2.2 million cost of this project.
• The new Music Wing is also on its way and will be designed this fall—we have identified $3.5 mil in one-time money in our reserves that System has agreed we can use for this project. We’ve also asked System for $4 million to add to the project.
Speaking of change, we’ve done a little moving around this summer. If you’re looking for Jerre Iverson, you probably can’t find him. Well, you can if you were behind the wall when we started this show. As the nurses moved out, University Advancement moved into the Ornelas Activity Center. Sponsored Research moved into the former advancement space on the Stewart Admin Building 3rd floor. Academic affairs moved to where business used to be and business moved to where academic affairs used to be. So, if you’re on the third floor of Stewart Admin you may get a little confused.

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Thank you for being a part of Convocation 2013. We will leave with a video that will have so many different messages for everyone. It is about personal perseverance and overcoming daunting odds. It’s about not judging books by their covers. You will feel sympathy, and empathy. You might want to cry, but you’ll feel happy, too.

It is about so much, but I want you to take away two things. First, notice the simple but crucial innovations at every turn—things you’ve not seen done this way before. WE want to be innovators.
And, second, think about the University Man on display and his university-educated family that created his environment that lead to success. In the end, it is less important that our students learn to be accountants, historians, mathematicians, or nurses—but that they learn what it means to be a university man or woman. The rest will follow, including learning. Let’s innovate, teach innovation and create university women and men. Have a great year!