Good morning, welcome to Metropolitan State University’s second annual Fall Convocation. Thank you for coming.

Our first order of business this morning is to introduce and recognize our new colleagues—faculty, staff, and administrators—who are either brand new with the beginning of the new academic year, or who have joined us over the past several months. As you are introduced, I would ask that you stand briefly and turn toward your colleagues here in the auditorium.

I will introduce the members of my administrative team who have joined us since the last Convocation. Then, I will ask each of the Vice Presidents and the Director of Human Resources to step forward and introduce the new colleagues in each of their areas.

[President Hammersmith introduced Murtuza Siddiqui, Chief Financial Officer and Vice President for Finance & Administration; Trenda Boyum-Breen, Vice President for Student Affairs; and Stephanie Miller, Director of Human Resources.]

[Vice President Murtuza Siddiqui introduced Ron Beckstrom, Interim Associate Vice President for Finance; David Park, Budget Director; Heather Schultz, Financial Management; Karalyn Foss, Financial Management; Christopher Maas, Facilities; Tanya Buetow, Information Technology; and Ji Li, Information Technology.]

[Vice President Trenda Boyum-Breen introduced Jennifer Oliphant, Disability Services; Alissa Allen, Registrar’s Office; and Jericho Doron, Registrar’s Office.]

[Human Resources Director Stephanie Miller introduced Cathy Bisser, Human Resources; and Laurissa Gauvitte, Human Resources.]

[Vice President Robert Heuermann introduced Anne Hodson, Communications and Marketing; and Mai Who Lor, Grants & Development.]

[Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs William Lowe introduced Cynthia DeVore, Institutional Research; Terrance Fox, College of Arts & Sciences faculty; Anongri Wengronowitz, College of Management faculty; Vivian Kuo, College of Management faculty; Jennifer Schultz, College of Management faculty; Barbara Beltrand, College of Management faculty; Carmen Franzmeier, College of Nursing and Health Sciences faculty; Laurie Barr, College of Nursing and Health Sciences office manager; Martha Hardy, Library; Christine Larson, Library; and Alexander Sonsteby, Library.]

Please join me in welcoming all of these new colleagues and, as you see them in the hallways, tunnels, or around, say hello and get to know them.
One year ago, at the University’s first Convocation, I was a newcomer. I was honored to be here as your President, but also humbled by the responsibility. I had been here only seven weeks, and I was very much aware of how much I did not yet know about Metropolitan State University. There was so much to learn—new names, new faces, institutional history, and data. I thank all of you for your support, assistance, and friendship as I went through that steep learning curve.

As I look back on the past year, I feel like we went to Valley Fair and rode on the biggest roller coaster ever. On July 1st, I bought my E-ticket, and the last 14 months have been quite a ride! There were times when the ride was way up high, and we could look all the way to the horizon and see a world of possibilities. Then there were plenty of flips and dips and heart-pounding curves, and it was all we could do to hold on for dear life and hope to stay safe. What I’d like to do this morning is to share with you some of the high points and tumult of that roller coaster ride, as well as what we can look forward to in the coming year.

The ride of the past year began way up on a high rail. The Chancellor had challenged the University to grow to 20,000 students by the year 2020, and the MnSCU Board of Trustees were discussing a metro area plan in which we would significantly expand the capacity of our baccalaureate and graduate programs. I was even more thrilled when the Chancellor and the Board of Trustees prepared a state budget proposal to fund that growth.

That draft budget request included a $5,000,000 increase to build our capacity. It also included another $5,200,000 for the Power of YOU program, which had been operating very successfully on temporary private funding.

Before I had time to get too comfortable with all that, though, the roller coaster took a couple of dips as I learned how our Minneapolis campus co-location had actually worked out in practice, and a sharp curve to the left as I learned more about our budget and finances. Co-location was the most pressing single problem I encountered early on, and while we’ve made some progress, that relationship is a challenge we continue to work on.

Regarding financial and management issues:

- The University had a long history of unresolved financial audit issues. That is simply unacceptable.
- We were on probation with the US Department of Education for sloppy handling of financial aid some years ago.
- We also had a very “fuzzy” budget system that was not transparent or particularly helpful to the University community.

Please understand, no money had been misappropriated or “gone missing” but we were not up to par in terms of transparency, timeliness, or adherence to the conventional standard practices for handling financial affairs.

On the financial side, we came around the corner and started gaining altitude.

- Our financial aid program has been brought into compliance. This summer the US Department of Education took us off probation, and we are now once again in good standing.
Also this summer, MnSCU’s internal auditors gave us a clean bill of health and congratulations for the best audit performance in many, many years. That’s not something that’s tangible on a day-to-day basis, but it is very, very important for our stature, position, and leadership role within the system.

Soon the University community will get a printed Fiscal Year 2010 budget that will be accurate, transparent, and informative about our organizational structure as well as our resource allocations.

These are real gains for the institution, for they give us a much more solid base with which to support our academic programs. I would like to publicly recognize and commend the folks who made this possible. They include Financial Aid Director Robert Bode and his staff, Vice President Murtuza Siddiqui, our new Budget Officer David Park, and the staff in Financial Management. I’d also like to commend and thank all of the vice presidents, deans, directors, and support staff across the institution who helped with the budget. It was very time consuming, but also very important for all of us.

As I look back on the ride I’ve had this year, the highest stretch of the ride came as I learned more about our students, faculty, and academic programs. I learned that 95% of our students are transfer students. The average Metropolitan student comes in with four transcripts, and some with as many as 15. I have found that they can be sophisticated critics of higher education, and very articulate about comparing their Metropolitan State experience with their experiences at other institutions.

One question I like to ask students and alumni is, “What have you liked most about Metropolitan State?” This is what they have told me, over and over and over again:

1. That the Metropolitan State faculty and courses are more challenging and demanding than those at their other institutions of higher learning. They say the Metropolitan State faculty motivate and push them, and that because the classes are small they can’t glide by. They have to engage, actively, and the faculty know them well enough to demand as much as they can give.

That includes students whose previous experiences were at the University of Minnesota. I was talking with one Inver Hills Community College faculty member, for example, who is getting a second master’s degree from us. Her first master’s degree was from the U, and she said her work here at Metropolitan State, with Professors Lawrence Moe and Rhona Leibel, is far more challenging than was her work at the U.

That’s the reaction I get from other students, undergraduate or graduate, whether they’re studying an individualized major, philosophy, law enforcement, accounting, nursing, psychology, or something else. I have heard that comment so consistently, from so many different students and alums, that I have come to take it very, very seriously.

2. Another set of comments I’ve heard consistently has to do with the personal attention students enjoy from faculty and advisors, and the privilege of studying with outstanding community faculty as well as outstanding resident faculty. An MBA alumnus who works for Allina Health, for instance, said he was absolutely thrilled to be able to take a specialized course, in his area of responsibility at Allina, from the Vice President in charge of that area at the Mayo Clinic.
3. Students and alumni also tell me their education here, at Metropolitan State, was greatly enriched by the diversity of our student body, faculty, and staff. This is a place where students of diverse backgrounds can feel at home, at ease, supported, and able to thrive. Our students tell me that they learn not only from the faculty, but also – and so much – from their diverse classmates. Some of them have said that when they take a course at the U – where classes are more homogeneous – they feel like something important is missing, and that’s the broad diversity of perspective and experience that we enjoy here at Metropolitan State.

4. Finally, students and alumni alike identify Metropolitan State’s flexibility as one of its best features, enabling them to get a high-quality education even in new or uncommon areas of study, and even while juggling work, family, and other important responsibilities.

I came into Metropolitan State with high expectations of quality, and what I have found in the last year is beyond expectations.

- Among the MnSCU universities, Metropolitan State graduates have the highest pass rates on their professional certification exams (such as CPA, nursing, and law enforcement licensure).

- This year, seven MnSCU students across the entire, statewide MnSCU system were awarded Nellie Stone Johnson scholarships. Three of the seven were Metropolitan State students.

- Our AQIP Quality Check-Up site visit, from the Higher Learning Commission, was a stellar success. The review team members were impressed that continuous quality improvement was not just “nice language that administrators use,” but an integral part of our organizational culture.

The AQIP team also told us we should be a national model for online learning, and they noted our national awards for online student services. Online education is, by the way, our biggest single growth area, one in which we have the same learning outcomes as in land-based instruction, and one in which I anticipate further development and expansion in the years ahead.

The AQIP team further recognized our distinctive mission, lean administrative structure, high professional certification pass rates, strong student engagement, and vanishing achievement gaps between minority and majority students.

- In fact, we have closed the gap between the graduation rates of our white students and our students of color. We still have challenges and need to do much better by certain populations, but we also should take pride in what we have accomplished to date.

- I also have heard wonderful feedback about our students and graduates. One recent example: Travelers Insurance, here in St. Paul, had openings for 5 student interns this year. Three of those slots went to Metropolitan State students. Travelers told us that our students interview exceptionally well, they’re mature, they’re personable, they’re better-prepared than other students, and they produce results.

- I am especially excited about our new programs we are opening. Last year we opened a new master’s degree program in nursing, designed for people who already have a bachelor’s degree in a different field and now want to get certification in nursing and to
enter that field. Our newest class includes students from Ohio, Nigeria, and Estonia, with degrees in a wide array of fields including history, communication, women’s studies, psychology, education, biology, criminology, and music. These students have outstanding academic records, and for each of our first two cohorts, we have had 100 applicants for 30 slots.

Then again, this is a roller coaster ride we’re talking about, where ups are usually followed by downs. The year’s biggest plunge came with the economic nose-dive. By November it was clear that the economy was on the skids and there would be less State funding than the year previous. So, the Board dropped from its budget request the $10.2 million it had sought to grow Metropolitan State and to continue the Power of YOU program. Then there were the Governor’s budget “unallotments” – that means taking back money already approved for the current year. Fortunately, because our enrollments were so strong and our fiscal model so sound, we were able to survive that without having to lay people off, like some of our sister institutions did. Of course, what happens with public funding was also happening with private gifts, and last fall we were questioning whether our Foundation would be able to continue its scholarship program at the current level.

But the tracks at least leveled out for us. While our sister universities were already going through significant reorganization and retrenchment, and our plans for expansion were put on hold, our enrollment growth and our lean organizational structure enabled us to move forward without layoffs or downsizing. And we were gaining elevation on other fronts.

- The Foundation secured new investment management for our scholarship funds and other donations. That strategy has been so successful that our privately-funded scholarship program is now fully funded for the next 4 years, even with reductions in some of our donors’ contributions.

- The ride climbed further as our University Plan came together. I was impressed with the process that had been used to develop it, the commitment to continuous improvement, and the connections between our strategic goals, our action plans, and our allocation of resources.

- We successfully concluded a number of faculty, staff, and administrative searches, bringing us outstanding new colleagues, whom you have just met. The search for a Dean of Students is underway, as is the search for a Dean of Arts and Sciences.

Soon we will launch another search which we would prefer not to have to do. Gary Seiler, Dean of the College of Management, has asked to return to his first love – teaching and faculty work. Next year he will be on an administrative sabbatical doing a special project, and in the fall of 2011 he will return to the faculty. Gary, as much as you will enrich our faculty, you will be sorely missed on the administrative leadership team. We will begin that search shortly.

Now back to the ride. As the state legislative session drew to a conclusion in May, I was surprised by some of the delightful twists and turns along the ride. We had strong signals of support in both houses of the legislature.

- They approved $5.75 million in funding for a new Metropolitan State classroom building here on the St. Paul campus, to replace the condemned building between St. John’s Hall and New Main.
They also added back into the higher education bill the $5.2 million to fund the Power of YOU program that had been dropped from the MnSCU budget proposal, and they approved that allocation.

Of course, both of these initiatives were immediately vetoed by the Governor. After all, this is a roller coaster ride. Nonetheless, we should not forget these votes of confidence from legislators, even in these tough economic times, which are what will really matter over the long term.

The Minnesota legislature also supported us academically, though it had quite a bumpy ride of its own. Our Oral Health Practitioner bill (AKA Advanced Dental Therapy) was signed into law, bringing the people of Minnesota as well as Metropolitan State University a huge victory and national attention. With this legislation, Metropolitan State University is authorized to become the first university in the entire nation to prepare mid-level dental practitioners. This builds on a successful model used in 52 other nations.

The Minnesota Dental Association and the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry had vigorously opposed us, just as the medical establishment had opposed the creation of nurse practitioners a few decades ago. In fact, they were the only opposition. But we won, like little David in the land of Goliath. Our new graduate program in Oral Health Practice opens this semester.

Looking back at the past 14 months, what I haven’t yet mentioned are the friends I made along the way. I spent a lot of time getting to know some of the Twin Cities civic, business, educational, and philanthropic leaders, and countless alumni and friends of the university. They think well of Metropolitan State, but it became clear to me that they hadn’t yet really heard the story we have to tell. You may recall that in April we held a reception in the Great Hall for major donors and community leaders. I gave them a comprehensive overview—and I think a fun one—of the many strengths and successes that make Metropolitan State distinctive, singular.

A common comment that evening, even among those who thought they knew the University, was, “Wow! I didn’t know that!” The excitement among that group was palpable, and I continue to hear about it. I’d like to thank all the faculty and staff who previewed that address and helped to refine it. It worked in April, and it continues to work. The Chancellor has a copy now, and he is sharing it with some of MnSCU’s Trustees.

We are learning to better tell our story, and it is a story of quality. Affordability is important, certainly, but that’s not the main story. Our story is one of quality.

Where are we now, and what can we expect in the coming year? Our enrollments are up 8% over a year ago, and our finances are solid, thanks in large part to the work that everyone at the University has done over the past year to pull together to serve more students, contain costs, and help us prepare realistic budgets for the current year. We are in pretty good shape.

What can we anticipate in the coming year? I expect it to be a year of building a solid base for our future, working on many fronts to position Metropolitan State University to assume its rightful place here in the Twin Cities and in the nation.

We will be updating our Facilities Master Plan which will establish a highly visible footprint across the Twin Cities.
• Just three weeks ago, we celebrated the beginning construction our Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Education Center in Brooklyn Park on the campus of Hennepin Technical College. Minnesota’s Attorney General was our keynote speaker, and she’s been singing Metropolitan State’s praises ever since. That facility will give us a significant footprint, in a state-of-the-art facility, in the Northwest Metro area. It also will free some space to accommodate growth on our Midway campus.

• In a couple of weeks we will host state legislators on this campus to introduce them to our plans for the Science Education Center which we anticipate building here on Dayton's Bluff, across East 6th Street.

• Planning has also begun for expansion in the Southwest Metro area and for solidifying and making more visible our presence in downtown Minneapolis.

We also will be putting into place a solid Academic Plan. Our academic leaders have risen to the occasion by laying out our goals for new program development, for growing enrollments both on-land and online, and for systematically expanding our degree completion programs for students coming to us from the two-year Metro Alliance colleges. The College of Management has been our model for making degree-completion programs available across the metro region, and we now plan to extend that model to other majors such as nursing, psychology, and individualized studies.

We now have an integrated marketing strategy to address today's competitive markets. This includes recruitment brochures to help us attract the community college students we now lose to the privates, and we do lose many to the privates. We also will be looking to strengthen, market, and expand our graduate and our online programs. Recognizing today's markets, we are investing our promotional advertising dollars in online ads aimed directly at our demographic in the Twin Cities. The early results have been amazing.

Our rightful place in the Twin Cities includes more in the way of graduate programming. Our first doctoral students, in Nursing Practice, graduated in May. And at the specific request of the Minnesota Society of CPAs, we expect to launch our second doctoral program, in Business Administration, in the coming year.

I would also note that planning is well under way for the upcoming Presidential Inauguration, which will be held on October 2nd. There will be a number of related activities going on during that time period, in addition to the ceremony itself, a big celebration (funded by a private donor), and a dinner (that also will be funded privately funded). This inauguration is not about Sue Hammersmith. It’s a celebration of the ongoing life of the University. Metropolitan State University will soon be 40 years old. We are maturing. Just as a “mom-and-pop” business, if it grows and thrives, transforms into something else, so are we transforming into something more solid, more lasting, more visible, and more dependable.

That’s why we are developing more methodical processes for planning, budgeting, supporting our academic programs, and telling our story. There will be more methodical support for professional development of all our employees, for going after grants and other external support, and for providing a good, supportive work environment for all our employees, on every campus.

You knew I would come back to co-location sooner or later, didn’t you? This summer, I took a position, a strong position, regarding co-location. And so far, I have been supported by the Office of the Chancellor.
Our new Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Education Center is a co-location arrangement with MCTC and Hennepin Technical College. In this case, though, Metropolitan State is the building owner, and we are using a business model that is completely different from the one attempted in Minneapolis.

I refused to be rushed into signing an agreement that was vague and premature. Instead, I convened a team that worked throughout the month of July to draft a formal, comprehensive contract that protects the academic integrity of our programs and the business interests of the University. Our draft co-location agreement, which I believe is respectful and fair to all three parties (MCTC, HTC, and Metropolitan State), is currently being reviewed by the Office of the General Counsel at MnSCU. Then it will go to our partners, MCTC and Hennepin Tech, for their review.

The same fairness and protection will be my goal as we negotiate our next co-location agreement for the Minneapolis campus (the current agreement expires at the end of 2010) or any new agreement with any other institution. We are too big, too complex, and too important to conduct co-location business on a handshake.

I also am demanding greater accountability for our co-location arrangements with MCTC, even if that means invoking the assistance of the Office of the Chancellor. As a result, this summer we received parking ramp revenues of nearly $500,000 which MCTC had been withholding since April of 2008. Technically, we own that ramp and we contract with MCTC to manage it. MCTC staffs the ramp, collects the parking fees, pays the expenses, and then forwards to us the remaining revenues which we use to pay off the bonds on the ramp. We will now receive not only our quarterly payments but also monthly reports of traffic, revenue, and expenses for that facility. That’s just one example of a new level of greater accountability that we will insist on, and that’s just on the financial side. I wanted you to know that our interests in Minneapolis will be attended to as we move forward.

Yes, looking back over the past year, it’s been quite a roller coaster ride. It brought ups and downs, twists and turns. But it was a good ride. We came through it together, and I think we are better off for having done so. And we made good friends along the way. As for myself, I’ve enjoyed a chance to catch my breath, but I’m now in line for the next ride. I invite you to join me. It’s sure to be fun, if we do it together.

Thank you for joining me this morning. If you have questions, the Vice Presidents and I will be available in the Great Hall for further discussion. Now please join me now in the Great Hall for our annual picnic.

Thank you again for coming, and best wishes with the new academic year.