Given that this will be timed by a goodly number of colleagues, I will summarize some of my ideas, preserving the congressional right to “revise and extend” remarks that will be published on the VPAA Web Site. And these remarks will be extended a great deal over the course of the year—a year in which I am committed to attempting to visit as many departments and colleges and many faculty in other settings as I can during the course of the year—in challenging times, discourse among colleagues may not change conditions, but may enhance understanding.

It’s the first week back. To paraphrase Tom Hanks, “the smell of school supplies is in the air.” The push to prepare for our learning and that of our students makes this both an exciting and a nerve racking time. There is no limit to the activities that can attract our attention, and no clear means of organizing the time which seems so limited for the completion of those activities. And so we all attempt to find ways to focus that attention to tasks that best fulfill the values we and our institution hold dear. In a number of ways, these values are given shape and direction in our strategic planning documents, to which we will be directed over and over during the coming year. My remarks center on those values, and strategic directions, as well as some activities during the coming year that will both shape and be shaped by these goals and values. And so, first, I want to begin by asserting some of the values which I believe reflect the actions of UWG. Second, I want to point to some evidence I think reflects some progress toward meeting those values now and in the coming months.

We should never underestimate the importance of a place like UWG. This summer a colleague at the American Association of State Colleges of Universities put the role of regional comprehensive institutions like ours into perspective. If Harvard were to disappear today, he observed, Yale would likely find a way to take up the slack. But if UWG were to disappear, the benefits we bring to our students, our community, and our state would likely never be replaced. The value you bring to us is not underestimated.

As a way of starting the conversation, I want to look to seven values that organize many of our efforts at the university.

We value academic honesty and academic freedom. We value ways of helping understand the value of claiming ideas as their own only when they are their own. We value faculty freedom to present ideas, and student’s freedom to ask us to support and defend those ideas when questioned.

We value life long learning—including the creation the conditions for students and graduates who think critically, communicate effectively, assess the implications of the great cultural, intellectual, economic, and social diversity in our communities, and who will be engaged fully in the activities of those communities both now and in the future.

We value reasoning as a focus for the learning we which to instill—and to perceive some obligation for all of us to not only make claims, but to advance reasons why those claims merit support.
We value the use of diverse means for making learning available to students and faculty, manifested in investments in traditional library materials, class room spaces, and of using available means and technologies to making learning accessible.

We value working with the students we have now, as well as working to prepare the ways in which the next generation of students are prepared to learn.

Often, we value the achievement of a variety of goals and values, quite independent of the identity of those who receive credit for the achievement of those goals.

At the same time, we value being held responsible for, as well as receiving credit for, faculty and student accomplishments. This valuing may manifest itself in salaries, in verbal recognition, in honors and honorifics, and more rather than fewer occasions of thank you. But collectively we find value for either personal or public understanding that what we do is important. We will speak later of the challenges facing us in a public setting that does not always appear to value those things which we value.

Of course, there are obvious manifestations of ways in which we advance those goals. The number of new faculty members this year is as large as any group in my eight years here. And the University has seen during that same period of time the growth of full time faculty from 300 to 405. The facilities master plan was driven by the university master plan—leading to proposals for three new academic facilities, a research and a library facility, as well as expanded student recreation space and residence halls, and 200 plus new acres of land given us by the city to advance the strategic goals of the university. A UWG student received a Goldwater Scholarship—the 4th such student in 6 years. Colleagues were recognized with the Jimmy and Roselyn Carter Award for Community University Collaborations for work with the Carroll County Latino Community. The Center for Teaching and Learning has initiated a seminar series for campus conversations on student learning, beginning with comments and perspectives from University Master Teachers. University Faculty serves on the steering committee of the American Democracy Project, a joint project of the New York Times and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Our participation was recognized in the July 30, 2004 issue of the NYT. Over the coming year, we will be focusing our attention on this project in at least four areas—environment, voter registration, service learning, readership and engagement in broader culture, and a presidential debate watch for students and faculty alike. Individual messages on each of these projects will be shared in the next few weeks—although I will ask you now to respond favorably when asked to ask your students to take the time to register to vote and to vote.

Of course we face challenges. The economic conditions described by President Sethna have forced us to make some difficult choices under difficult circumstances—not the least of which has been facing two years in which colleagues either had no salary increase, or had increases averaging 1% in real annual terms—and with these fewer salary dollars, fewer dollars were available to make adjustments to compensation. And
while all of us are committed to making progress in this area, we will be challenged for a while even as the economic conditions continue to be uncertain.

We face an external environment in which key stakeholders, while generally claiming to value higher education, have made some competing claims that make that difficult without reservations—public claims of huge levels of waste in inefficiency in public higher education; pledges for political purposes that taxes can never be increased to support public services, and that the solution to lower revenues is the application of priorities.

We also face an external environment that makes reasoned resolution of differences quite challenging. David Horowitz, the author of the Academic Bill of Rights, is also the author of a work advancing the perspective of politics as war. In the face of some American views that politics is the art of the possible, Horowitz’ view makes reasoned discourse “challenging.” First, that in political warfare you do not fight to prevail in an argument, but to destroy your enemy’s ability to fight. Second, in war, there are two sides: friends and enemies. And while varying authors attribute this view to either democrat or republican partisans, the result of accepting these views is problematic in any number of ways—not the least of which that it undermines the ability to find shared solutions to our challenges to advancing faculty and student learning here and in public institutions in Georgia.

To quote David Kirp: “The ultimate question is this: can the public be persuaded that universities represent something as ineffable as the common good—more specifically, that higher education contributes to the development of knowledgeable and responsible citizens, encourages social cohesion, promotes and spreads knowledge, increases social mobility and stimulates the economy? Can the argument convincingly be made that the university offers something of such great value that it is worth subsidizing even in the teeth of bottom line pressures—that, as NYU’s John Sexton says, in certain spheres “money is not the coin of the realm.” (p. 263).

In the face of these challenges, it is vital that we be involved in some important continuing activities to help us continue to advance our own abilities to advance learning. These activities and most others are derived from conversations with colleagues indicating we ought to be doing something on a wide array of fronts. There are ten such areas on which I will touch here. No one faculty member is responsible for all of these tasks—but in our conversations this year, I look forward to discovering the ones which will best suit your interests and academic talents.

1. Assessment—to paraphrase the work of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, assessment of learning by ourselves and our students is something done by the faculty, not to the faculty. It is not an addition to work—we do it now in the main informally; we will have to do it under any circumstances, and not on terms we establish; and with assessment, we believe there will be a growing body of evidence proving what we know to be true—that
time and time again we have significant effects on student learning. Course evaluation review, one topic of work by the Senate Committee on Academic Policies and Procedures, will be one critical component of our emerging commitment to prove we are having significant effects on the learning of our students.

2. Academic freedom on campus—need to attend to our own commitment to provide a supportive learning environment for our students—not to coddle, but to be unafraid to reinforce the question to them and to ourselves—what is the evidence being used to prove the claim we are making? How explicit are we in identifying the reasoning we use to move from that evidence to our claims? And by advancing our commitment to an environment of academic freedom, we begin to advance a third commitment to our students—the creation of an environment fostering critical thinking—a characteristic most often cited as the essential trait to be possessed by our students upon graduation.

3. General Education and our commitment to student learning. General education reflects the collective judgment of a faculty of the essential knowledge and dispositions—skills, things to know and ways of knowing that are accessible to every student with a degree from UWG. Included in these discussions must be the ethical responsibilities of learners found in our student honors pledge. Together with assessment and program review this year of our general education program, we have a collective opportunity to use data to determine our success in preparing our students to both succeed in their majors, and an external environment requiring lifelong learning.

4. Renewal of a Commitment to strategic goals and objectives. Here we must redouble our efforts to reward and recognize departments and programs that have set goals and projects that advance university core and aspirational goals.

5. We must continue our progress in technology as a means of improving the ways in which we improve student and faculty learning. Our new portal is one example of this. Our more than 7000 campus computer workstations are an extraordinary advance from 10 years ago in the fabled days of rotary phones. Our new phones give us control over costs of communication that will soon manifest itself in better services for lower university costs.

6. We must continue to be alert to issues of morale. In the main it means we must listen to each other. We must continue as a part of our commitment to assessment continue our commitment to open information on a variety of items—on budget, on courses, on program assessment, and on processes for personnel review. And while we may not be able to achieve all that we wish in any of these areas, openness tends to give each of us the tools to cope in our own ways with the disappointments often associated with people who are deeply committed to improving the conditions they, their students, and their colleagues face.

7. We must continue to foster success in creating a diverse university environment. Roosevelt Thomas’ work on diversity leadership identifies diversity as a collection of similarities and differences—and that leadership under diversity conditions requires an understanding of the way in which these similarities and differences can be used to achieve institutional requirements—and not just institutional preferences. Our creation of a diverse population on campus as well
as our commitment to seeking ways to take advantage of that diversity to improve learning is at the heart of our commitment to diversity.

8. We must trust to our core values in the face of major changes in academic leadership. Change always brings with it uncertainty. Uncertainty brings with it “creative narratives.” As I noted last year, some have characterized universities as “…hot beds of rumor and innuendo, held together by inertia.” As we go forward with these activities, we will do all we can to emphasize an open process, a process that requires full faculty participation, and a process that will bring to campus colleagues who understand that there is nothing incompatible between spirited advocacy for positions, and collaborative support for university strategic goals and objectives.

9. We must refresh our commitment to a university wide responsibility for the preparation of future educators and leaders. The processes are in place to accomplish this with a university wide teacher preparation faculty and a university wide doctoral faculty in school improvement. We had last year faculty across the campus make important contributions to on-going reforms in curriculum set state wide for K-12 education—and we will continue to have faculty make contributions to the way these curriculum changes are accomplished.

10. We must continue our progress on student retention and student success. With recent changes in our admissions requirements, we believe we will begin to have better prepared students whose retention and chances for graduation ought to improve. Nonetheless, with conversations about advising, about the growing first year course program, with increased collaboration across student services and academic affairs, we expect to see continued gains in student learning and thus student success.

I am honored to have the chance to serve this institution each day. I have great colleagues, and I still like coming to school. I continue to work with exceptional deans, chairs, faculty and students on a daily basis. In our office, Patsy Barr, Teresa Ock, Lucretia Gibbs, Don Rice, Sandra Stone, work exceptionally hard to create the conditions for student and faculty learning on campus. They prove each day the truth of a claim made some time ago by Speaker Sam Rayburn and Speaker Thomas P Tip O’Neill: “Remember, any jackass can kick over a barn, but it takes a carpenter to build one.” (p. 155)