Welcome back, friends and colleagues. I hope your holidays were wonderful and everything you wanted them to be.

What I would like to do for a few minutes is to talk about issues we are facing as a University. My primary job is to oversee the efficient management of the institution and its resources. But I also must be vigilant about potential threats to the well-being of Coastal Carolina University and those who depend upon it for an education, for allied services, and for a livelihood.

Let me begin by uttering the words that seems to be creating some angst—The “Feel the Teal” Customer Service Initiative. You may be asking why? And I recognize that some of you don’t agree with this initiative. But let me explain what we are facing.

The US economy is uncertain at best. If only we could predict what Washington will do. But the political debate aside, just consider these facts:

- Federal financial aid is changing—and not for the better. Considering nearly 80 percent of our student body has some sort of financial aid, a downturn will affect us negatively.
- Students are graduating with excessive student loans and are finding paying back these loans to be a major challenge especially given the current job prospects in the US.
- There is a significant push nationwide for no tuition increases. As you recall, we had a zero percent increase in our in-state tuition for this academic year—and the Board of Trustees is pushing hard for a zero percent increase for in-state students for the upcoming academic year. In a similar fashion, our out-of-state tuition will not increase much more than the higher education price index (HEPI). We cannot price ourselves out of the out of state market from which we draw half of our students and roughly 60 percent of our revenue.
- Performance funding is gaining momentum in Columbia and the General Assembly is certain to take some action. What this means to us is we will be evaluated by several key metrics—retention and graduation rates; the number of in-state students; job or graduate/professional school placement; and our role in economic development.
- Finally, the number of South Carolina high school graduates continuing on to college over the next ten years is flat, meaning that the competition for the college-bound in-state students will become even more competitive, especially for those of the quality we desire here.
Do these constitute a threat to the institution’s well-being? Are we facing a perfect storm? Who knows what the near future will bring. We could sit back and wait, and have things dictated to us; but quite frankly that is simply unacceptable. That’s never been the Coastal way, nor will we allow it to start now. We can do something or we can do nothing. I’m choosing to do something.

Eddie Dyer recently spoke of two critical numbers for us and numbers we all need to remember: 84 and 90. Why those two numbers and why are they important? Eighty four represents the percent of students who leave a university because of some lack of service, whether registration, advisement, class scheduling, or the like; and 90 represents the percentage of our revenues that come from tuition.

My initiative is 2-pronged—customer service on the administrative side provided by our staff; and student success on the academic side, driven primarily by you, the faculty. Let me briefly explain. I do not expect faculty to provide service to students as customers. For you, as academicians, they are not customers. They are seekers, hopefully looking to broaden their horizons, sharpen their analytical skills, and accomplish all of the things that higher education is about. You cannot treat them as customers in the classic way and accomplish those things. But you can give them your very best when it comes to advising, classroom instruction, spending time with them outside of class and generally being available to help them through the process of growing as scholars. In other words, helping them be successful as students, so that they will return to us each year and complete their studies in a timely manner. That is the Student Success portion of the equation and initiative.

For staff, the students and their parents or sponsors are customers in every best sense of the word. They are paying us for a service that we deliver and our staff needs to be as professional as humanly possible in delivering the services that are not performed by faculty. That is the Customer Service portion of the equation and initiative.

Part of delivering professional services is presenting oneself in a professional manner, including attire. We have made a statement about blue jeans for that very reason. The Initiative, though, is not about blue jeans! My goodness ladies and gentlemen, let’s think bigger picture than that. It’s about the future of this great institution. It’s about what CCU means to this state and this region – in terms of education, culture and the local economy. It’s most importantly about the students who need our help in preparing for their futures. And it’s about jobs, our jobs.
Referring back to my comments about threats and a potential perfect storm, if we do not continue our smart growth, and if we continue to see retention decrease, we are in serious trouble. As your president, I will do everything in my power to avoid such trouble and continue our success.

Compounding this is the realization that our Board of Trustees has asked for us to cut another one million dollars out of our operating expenses. These cuts will be across all parts of the university—athletics, administration, and academic. If you recall, our Board has supported the Faculty Senate’s and AAUP’s initiative for salary compression relief and performance pay for both faculty and staff. But this will not come from existing funds; but rather from savings and new revenues. And if we have a zero percent in-state tuition increase, any new revenues can only come from the small out-of-state increase and from growth – smart growth.

We need to do things better, faster, and easier in serving all who “touch” this campus. These are not gimmicks; they are our service and success reality. We need to strive to do better than other colleges and universities to set the standard of excellence that draws students to us—and keeps them here – because the competition is only going to get tougher.

Look at what the University of Toledo is now doing to keep students as they’ve experienced a dramatic decrease in retention—losing upwards of 10 percent of their student body. They have resorted to go 3 years with no increase in tuition and fees. They are offering discounts on dorms if you stay past your freshman year. And while the list goes on, they keep losing students. Sadly the University of Toledo is in a spiraling downward motion. Is Toledo the harbinger for mid-size state institutions, the canary in the mine shaft? If you look at the January 2013 article in by Nathan Harden titled “The End of the University as We Know It,” in the next 50 years half of the Universities that exist today will not be around.

Moreover, in Florida (and probably Texas) the governor is demanding that Universities cut academic majors where there are no foreseeable jobs in the marketplace. Talk about micro-managing. We never want to get to that point—nor will our Board of Trustees allow it. If such decisions need to be made, we want to make them locally.

We all should know that to sustain what we want costs us money. We can ill afford to lose our students because something is making them feel less than nurtured, well served, important and successful on our campus. Students have reported to me that while we have some wonderful faculty and staff, we have those who leave much to be desired. They tell me there are those who don’t care about students; who could care less if students learn anything or get any help; and give
the impression that students are a “necessary pain in their rear-ends.” You wouldn’t patronize an organization that made you feel that way—so why do we expect students to feel differently? Is it because we believe we have captive audiences who “have to go to college?” That attitude may have worked decades ago during the days of draft deferments or when students had fewer choices, but not today. The rise of massive open online courses at some of the best-known universities in the US attests to that realization.

The choice is ours. We can chart our own future or it will be charted for us. As we heard in the movie Apollo 13, failure is not an option. It is not an option here. As off the wall as you may think some of my decisions are and what this customer service/student success initiative is about, please try to understand and recognize what stands behind them—moving this University forward with the local, state, regional, national, and international acclaim that it deserves. However, economic, financial and fiscal necessity dictates that it cannot happen unless we attract, retain and graduate students. Recall the 90% number that I mentioned earlier.

Friends and colleagues, we have a chance to do something that will assure our success, and our jobs, over the next several decades. I simply ask you to try it; experience what such an initiative can do for our students and for us as employees. I think you will be pleasantly surprised. In addition, if you have ideas about how we can better serve students and help them succeed or if you have an idea about how my initiative can be improved, please bring it forward. This will have to be a team effort in every sense of that phrase. You are a bright group and I solicit your thinking, individually and collectively, on these important issues.

Again, welcome to the Spring 2013 semester—have a great one. I will be doing everything in my power to make that so and I know you will be doing the same, as well. And, as always, thank you for coming to these get-togethers. It is important that we meet and talk about the well-being of this great university.