Good afternoon. Not yet two months into the job, and I’m already becoming a regular at the coast. I may need to tour UNC Wilmington five or six times this summer, just to be thorough.

Thank you, Hal, for that warm introduction and to Connie Majure-Rhett and Mitch Lamm for hosting me today.

I’m grateful to the local leaders here today, including Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo, State Representative Susi Hamilton, and State Senator Michael Lee.

I’m also happy to see my friend, Raiford Trask, one of the wise and judicious people who selected me for this job.

And I’m thankful to all of you for choosing to be here today.

As many of you may know — and as protestors have reminded me over the past two months — I served as President of the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

I was also on the Dallas Chamber Board before making the move to North Carolina, which is all to say that I have a very sincere understanding of the value organizations like this bring to our economy and to our people.

This is a business organization, certainly, but the goal that unites us all is a desire to build a stronger North Carolina with a better quality of life for all citizens.

I thank you for it, and I want you to know you have a full partner in the University of North Carolina.

The business community is both a beneficiary and a benefactor of higher education, and I welcome your support and depend on your insight.

North Carolina has long been known for a visionary approach to higher education—it was one of the main selling points of this job.
And this region in particular has a proud history of vision and smart investment when it comes to education.

It was business leaders like you who came together in 1947 to lead the creation of a new institution of higher learning to serve the region.

They recognized that wise investment today pays off in greater prosperity tomorrow, and they were so confident in that bet that they supported a small tax increase to fund the new school. That took courage and a spirit of service, and it has paid off in the brilliant institution you have here today.

Under Zito Sartarelli, UNC Wilmington stands poised to reach new heights of academic excellence and economic impact.

With his global business background, Zito is a natural partner for this group.

He understands Wilmington’s role as an economic engine for this region and for the state, and he sees the potential to reach even higher.

As you may know, I am currently on a 100-day journey across the state, seeing every one of our UNC system schools before the academic year comes to close – and really, it’s been 16 universities in 60 days.

I have seen the beauty of North Carolina from Cullowhee to Elizabeth City, and witnessed the impact of higher education in every corner of the state.

Last night, I had the opportunity to see your beautiful and thriving downtown, a testament to the truly visionary work of Chris Boney and his team.

I have heard remarkable stories that capture the transformation this state has seen in a few short generations. And I have marveled at the pride people take in the public University, this University of the People.

That pride is evident in last month’s overwhelming vote for the Connect NC bond, which reaffirmed a long-range commitment to public education, and gave an enormous boost to UNC Wilmington’s growing prowess in health sciences.

But North Carolinians are also anxious — worried about the future and growing more skeptical about the value of what we do. It’s our responsibility as a University to meet that challenge, and your responsibility as civic leaders and stakeholders to help guide us in our work.

I have heard from many students who are worried about the cost of their education; parents who are worried about an uncertain economic future; employers who are worried about the readiness of our graduates for a changing economy; and policymakers and community leaders...
who are worried about the best way to embrace changing demographics and an uneven economic landscape.

The good news is that more citizens are seeking an affordable, accountable, convenient, and lifelong education.

The worrisome news is that we have a widening achievement gap that threatens our goal of expanded access in the short run and undermines our prosperity and wellbeing in the long run.

I believe we are at a tipping point in North Carolina. To meet the needs of our citizens of North Carolina, we must go beyond the first-time, full-time, straight-out-of-high-school model that has long dominated higher education.

Many of today's students are different, and they come with different needs and expectations.

UNC Wilmington is, in many ways, ahead of the curve in recognizing these trends.

17% of UNC Wilmington undergraduates are over 25 years old – higher than the system average.

Across the state, 30% of UNC students transfer or attend part-time. UNC Wilmington is above that average, as well.

Colleges and universities are adapting and transforming to meet the demands of a very different kind of job market, with multiple careers across a lifetime, and new technologies that are transforming the way we work and the skills employers expect.

This community is already preparing students for this new economy with the creation of a technology-focused high school, and UNC Wilmington has growing programs in STEM fields.

We also face shifting demographics. Nearly a quarter of the state’s population is under 18 years old, a sign of our state’s rapid population growth over the past decade. We’re now the ninth most populous in the nation, and still expanding.

But that growth has been uneven. Many of our rural counties — including several in this region — are getting older and losing population. How do we balance the needs of a rising generation against the imperative of caring for those in retirement?

And how do we prepare for a more diverse future? More than 20% of our citizens speak a language other than English, highlighting the challenge of integrating newcomers into the American fabric. We've done it before, but it takes thought and work.

In the past decade, North Carolina’s Hispanic population has grown by more than 180,000, along with a 20,000-strong expansion of our Asian-American population.
Higher education has a role to play in preparing for these changes, just as we have a role to play in helping each of your enterprises grow and thrive. You depend on us to graduate the next generation of customers, contributors, and citizens. And we have much work to do on that front.

Across the entire UNC system, 7 out of 10 full-time students graduate within 6 years – while attending 4-year institutions. That's above the national average, but still adds up to a lot of wasted potential.

The numbers are more worrisome when you break down the demographics. Only a quarter of low-income students finish in 4 years, and only 55% finish in 6 years.

That kind of achievement gap goes a long way in explaining the paradox of North Carolina's economy being among the top 10 in the nation – yet our per capita income falling into the bottom 15. When opportunity is uneven, the state’s progress will be uneven.

Our campuses, including UNC Wilmington, are taking steps to improve, but continued progress will require renewed partnerships with folks like you.

The effort around the Connect NC Bond is an excellent example. UNCW’s new Allied Health and Human Services facility will help educate more students in high-demand fields.

The Bond was also an excellent boost going into the legislative session that begins next week. We heard some encouraging news earlier today. Governor McCrory outlined a budget that includes some thoughtful investment in higher education. We look forward to working with the Governor and state lawmakers in advancing some of our shared priorities for North Carolina.

Competitive pay for our public servants is at the top of our priority list. On every campus visit, I have met dedicated men and women facing the same core challenge: we can’t run competitive institutions if we can’t offer competitive compensation. Excellent education takes excellent people, and we’re at risk of losing them if we go yet another year without addressing critical needs.

I’m hopeful we might lift the private fundraising restrictions, which will allow us to cultivate greater private support for the University and relieve some of the pressure on student costs.

Expressing support with your wallets is always welcome, as I’m sure Zito will be more than happy to explain to each of you in great detail. But I also ask you give freely of your experience and expertise, which are invaluable to us and our students.

Help us understand your needs and how we can be an effective partner.
Work alongside us to offer internships, mentoring opportunities, and career guidance to students eager for real-world experience.

Call on our faculty for research partnerships and commercialization opportunities.

Take advantage of the state-of-the-art labs and facilities that your tax dollars and philanthropy have helped build.

And hold us accountable as we focus, first and foremost, on broadened opportunity and greater student success.

Almost seven decades ago, community leaders like you worked hand-in-hand with academia to create an institution of higher learning for southeastern North Carolina. Their vision now benefits the entire state.

Let’s rededicate ourselves to that mission, to the mutual benefit of the University, this city, the coastal region, and all citizens of North Carolina.

Thank you. I am happy to take your questions.