Good morning, and thank you for that warm introduction, Dr. Arav Ouandlous, and thank you for your leadership on the Faculty Senate.

I thank you for gathering today to hear of the state of this great university, which dates back to 1890. It is a special pleasure to address you on the eve of the 124th year of our founding.

Whether you are here in person or via the Internet, welcome to Savannah State University. Your presence indicates your belief and commitment to this university’s mission and its rich legacy. It is wonderful to see so many faculty, staff and students – as well as community members. We are honored to have with us today Regent Don Waters, who represents Georgia’s first district on the Georgia Board of Regents. Georgia State representative Mickey Stephens, District 165.

Also, with us are many of Savannah State’s alumni, we welcome Mr. Roy L. Jackson, president of the SSU National Alumni Association, local chapter members, and board members of the Savannah state University Foundation and welcome to our community partners.

Steeped in tradition, Savannah State’s legacy continues to transform lives, taking students where they are when they arrive and sending them forth ready to compete and reshape the world when they graduate.

We are fortunate to have had a significant role in transforming the lives of students — young and old, when many of these individuals would not have had the opportunity to realize their dreams without this university by the sea. That has been our purpose, our noble cause, since the founding 124 years ago, and it continues to be so today.

We are proud to be the first public institution of higher education in this city and the first public HBCU in Georgia.

The root of our story begins when many doors to education were closed to selected citizens simply because of their heritage. Institutions such as Savannah State have forged pathways to the future in which we are today. Because of this opportunity to educate the underserved and impact the social and political advancement of the nation, many doors have since opened.

Yet, SSU as an access institution still recognizes the urgency to create equitable educational opportunities for all citizens of Georgia. That has been our purpose and so it remains today.
Savannah State is a sacred, special place, sitting on precious breath-taking coastal marshland, in the heart of one of the fastest growing cities in the country, Savannah, known for its rich history, culture and also for many educational opportunities.

Our legacy includes great scholars, beginning with our first graduate and son of our first president. In fact, the first graduate of this institution was Richard R. Wright, Jr., son of then-president Richard R. Wright, Sr. In June, 1898, the college awarded its first baccalaureate degree to Richard R. Wright, Jr., the only member of the baccalaureate degree class of 1898. Richard Jr. went on to become the first African-American to earn a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. He became president of Wilberforce University in Ohio and the 57th Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

At this fall’s commencement in December, you will hear from another impressive graduate from the class of 1996 who also went on to earn a doctorate degree: Dr. Alissa Johnson who is currently the deputy chief information officer at the White House.

Another recent graduate, Kelvin Frazier, is currently a doctoral student in the physical chemistry division at MIT who will graduate next year. Kelvin is an honor graduate who earned two B.S. degrees, chemistry and mathematics.

Recent graduate Daniel Heslop, B. S. in mathematics, had interviews with 12 medical schools, including Emory University, despite his math background. He is now enrolled at Meharry Medical School on scholarship.

SSU alumnus, B.S. in chemistry - David Hongo went on to earn a Ph.D in microbiology from University of Kentucky. He also completed a Post Doc experience at Harvard and is currently a scientist at Stanford University.

Our graduates continue to rise and we are proud of our rich legacy of preparing entrepreneurs, politicians, community leaders, military officers, educators, journalists, scientists, physicians and so much more that make significant contributions in their communities and beyond. Our challenge remains the preparation of graduates who can reflect deeply and who apply knowledge to the needs of the day and of the unforeseen tomorrow.

Higher education institutions are facing real challenges as they must reinvent themselves in this 21st century. A glance at the headlines of the Chronicle of Higher Education or any other industry publication reveals higher education is undergoing a transformation.

Recent headlines address enrollment declines in public education, retention, college completion, access, affordability, student loan default rates, title IX, campus safety, tenure, salary and equity pay issues, online courses, MOOCs, academic freedom, the rising cost of textbooks and I can go on and on.
So where are we in the midst of these intellectual conversations about the future of higher education in the United States?

While many of these examples are challenges for small and mid-size public universities, they also present many opportunities for us to grow and expand, to enhance what we do, to educate the leaders of future generations.

We are proud to be part of the University System of Georgia, in this great state of Georgia. Georgia's value of higher education is demonstrated by the HOPE Scholarship, and the USG's commitment to create a more educated Georgia, public education remains the most accessible and affordable path to attain a higher education degree.

As Savannah's university, we share the city's resilience and pioneering spirit and enjoy the partnerships in this city and county with our business and workforce and our sister educational institutions. In this city, the university has flourished, providing the leadership and contributing to the cultural environment of coastal Georgia.

Today, I will frame my address within the five strategic priorities of our new strategic plan entitled “125 Years of Distinction: Our Legacy, Our Future.” While there are enrollment declines in Georgia and throughout the nation at public and private universities, we have experienced a decade of steady enrollment increases. We have recruited students throughout the state and today, for the first time in its history, more of our students come from outside the Savannah metropolitan area.

More than 90% of students come from Georgia and the majority will remain in Georgia joining the expanding workforce opportunities here in their home state. Financial aid data reveals that 59% of our students are first-generation college-goers and at least 30% of our students have parents with an income of less than $25,000. In 2013-14, 80% of SSU's first-time, full-time students and 74% of all undergraduates received Pell funds. Typically, about 90% of SSU's students receive some form of financial aid in the form of grants or loans. Furthermore, according to SSU's freshman survey, about half of the entering students expect to work part-time and 15% expect to work full-time while attending college.

More than 50% of our students chose to live on our pristine campus where they find most of the comforts of home and a nurturing, living and learning community.

We are proud to report that each year we are producing more and more graduates. Our 2013-14 academic year produced the largest number of graduates in a single academic year and we will continue to see these increases as more students graduate in four to six years.

Our first strategic priority focuses on academic engagement and achievement. Last fall, the College of Business Administration launched its new bachelor's degree in global logistics and international business. This degree is the right fit for the industries of the region, for Savannah State University and for its students. We see these graduates being prepared to work at the
Port of Savannah, which is considered one of the most strategic ports on the East Coast. It is poised for great expansion as traffic through the Panamá Canal brings larger ships to our shores.

Last year, we received approval from the Georgia Board of Regents to offer our existing business management major online so that working professionals who don’t have time for the traditional classroom can earn the Bachelor of Business Administration degree – no matter where they are located. This online degree responds to the needs of adult learners with some college experience who require flexibility in mode and time of instructional delivery. It responds to the state's “Go Back and Move Ahead!” initiative to enhance college completion.

Another advantage for our adult learners is that Savannah State University is also an E-core affiliate. By making the electronic-core curriculum accessible to students of this region, Savannah State allows adult learners and other students at a distance to complete the core curriculum and to advance to completion of the bachelor’s degree.

Essentially, students can complete the first two years of their collegiate careers through E-core, which makes it easier to “Go Back and Move Ahead!” An increasing number of our faculty offer courses through E-core. Thank you, Dr. Nat Hardy, director of Graduate Studies and Online Education, for leading the E-core initiative, which is transforming curriculum delivery, particularly for non-traditional student learners.

The bachelor of interdisciplinary studies is our newest bachelor degree approved by the Board of Regents last spring, (Thank you Regent Waters), and is structured to allow students to take advantage of the university’s many offerings and to customize a program of study that suits their academic goals. The future of higher education and preparing students for the global job market often means combining two majors into one degree. Our students pursue education with passion and cultivate practical knowledge of their disciplines, through clinical and service learning experiences, such as those in social work or HIV/AIDS public education through our NIH grant to the Criminal Justice Program or in research tackling problems in the life or physical sciences. Such practical experience gives great value to degrees earned at SSU.

These and other initiatives support key strategies in Savannah State’s Complete College Georgia plan to increase access, retention and completion in order to meet our state’s goal to increase the number of Georgians with certificates and degrees by 2020.

According to the CCG data, by 2020, it is projected that more than 60 percent of jobs in Georgia will require a certificate, associate’s degree, or bachelor’s degree. Presently, approximately 42 percent of the state’s young adults, its burgeoning workforce, are prepared to such a level. To remain competitive, Georgia must not only maintain current graduation levels, but also produce an additional estimated 250,000 graduates in upcoming years.
Savannah State is making progress on reaching our goal of increasing degree completion. Our CCG effort includes more high-touch academic advising and mentoring. Professional advisors were added to the Center for Academic Success for more quality student engagement.

Our efforts to increase access and completion for Latino students received a boost thanks to a $100,000 University System of Georgia Hispanic-Latino College Completion Grant to launch a summer bridge program for first-year Latino students. Also we have brought on board additional recruiters in admissions and a coordinator for multicultural outreach in the Center for Academic Success.

SSU continues to strengthen its K-12 school system partnerships through existing initiatives such as Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search and Savannah Early College, with our partner the Savannah Chatham School District.

Meeting the needs of our non-traditional students continues to be a focus for us, and that includes enlisted military personnel and their families. Savannah State University has earned the Military Friendly Schools recognition for six consecutive years now – landing on the list again this year. This recognition is earned by those institutions that go the extra mile to extend services. Complete College Georgia is where the education attainment battle will be won by making sure students of all ages are able to achieve successful matriculation which leads to graduation.

Our faculty and students bring the academic classroom experience to life everyday.

This past spring, eyes were glued to NASA-TV awaiting the launch of the Space X-3 Mission, which transported groundbreaking research prepared by Savannah State faculty and students to the International Space Station. Under the tutelage of Dr. Karla-Sue Marriott, associate professor of chemistry and forensic science, students Shakema Bowman, a forensic science major, and Daniel Meis, a biology major, spent months in the chemistry lab synthesizing compounds with therapeutic potential toward the treatment of auto-immune diseases and related disorders that affect astronauts after long-term space travel. The project is funded by a $276,000 NASA University Research 1 grant on the Investigation of Countermeasures to Modulate and Augment the Immune System on the International Space Station. This is but one example of the riveting research that goes on every day in the labs of Drew-Griffith and other campus buildings.

And the grant speaks to the productivity of Savannah State’s faculty and staff in acquiring external funding in support of education, scholarships and more, Savannah State presently has approximately $38 million in external funds for multiple years, of which almost $10 million was received during the previous fiscal year.

Other noteworthy grants received last year include:
A $900,000 grant from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services
Administration for “Get in the Know” HIV and Substance Abuse Awareness. Dr. Johnnie Myers, an associate professor of criminal justice, is leading the initiative, which includes peer training and education. The student peer leaders are educating the campus and community at large on the risks that lead to HIV and best prevention approaches.

Savannah State’s strategic initiatives continue to be supported by U.S. Department of Education grants. Two grants totaling more than $3.9 million were awarded to Title III and almost $2.9 million was awarded to the Upward Bound program, which is one of three federally funded TRIO programs at Savannah State. Thank you Ms. Dedra Andrews for your leadership of the Title III program.

The School of Teacher Education officially returned to Savannah State after receiving approval last fall from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission following a review by the organization’s board of examiners. This year faculty in the SOTE collaborated with the faculty in College of Sciences and Technology to earn a $1.4 million grant from the National Science Foundation Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program.

This five-year grant will be used to prepare science, technology, engineering and math teachers for high-need middle and high schools. We thank the principal investigator Dr. Keenya Mosley of the School of Teacher Education and also Dr. Jonathan Lambright, interim dean of the College of Sciences and Technology; and Dr. Mohamad Mustafa, professor and chair of Engineering Technology.

Savannah State has a prolific STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics – program, and our STEM students continue to distinguish themselves, earning accolades far and wide:

Last spring, Sarah Dillard, a civil engineering technology major from Atlanta, now a sophomore, was one of 75 students from across the nation named to the inaugural HBCU All-Star Class by the Department of Education’s White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Ms. Dillard represented SSU at the conference in September in Washington, D.C. She was one of seven Georgia students selected for the honor.

Marine sciences major Darius Sanford was a summer intern at Gray’s Reef and earned the Best Presentation award among his cohort. The award included travel funds to present his research at the ASLO Aquatic Sciences professional conference meeting in Grenada, Spain, in February 2015. The internship was supported by the National Science Foundation’s Bridge to Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) Program and led by Savannah State University’s Marine Sciences Program.

Another marine sciences student, Kris Drummond of Washington, D.C., spent his summer internship at the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography where he extracted and studied bottlenose dolphin DNA. And when Kris isn’t conducting research in the labs, he is practicing and executing football plays as a valued member of the Tiger football team as a wide receiver.
In July, Kris was one of five Savannah State Tigers named to the 2014 MEAC All-Conference Preseason Team.

And he is not alone. Many members of our Division I athletic teams are achieving excellence in the classroom as well as in their sports.

The Department of Journalism and Mass Communications offers one of our top five academic majors. During this past summer, six students from the Savannah State University Department of Journalism and Mass Communications worked alongside a national-level television producer to put together a television pilot for the Arizona-based Canyon Ranch Institute.

The students -- Myron West and Latasha Wright, both of Savannah; Jessica Coard of Summerton, SC; Shantez Herrington of Augusta, Ga.; Jocelyn Stargel-Zachery of Riverdale, Ga.; and Terry Clayborn of Decatur, Ga. – met weekly with the 20 wellness program participants to conduct interviews, shoot footage and contribute to the post-production tasks for the television project, which is expected to be sold to a broadcast or cable network. The students’ work was supported by a small grant from local philanthropists.

Professor Wanda Lloyd, named department chair last year, is a former newspaper professional and was selected as a fellow of the Scripps Howard Academic Leadership Academy at Louisiana State University’s Manship School of Journalism and Mass Communications this past summer. She was also recently elected to a three-year term to serve on the Accrediting Committee of the ACEJMC.

We thank Dr. Felicia Bell, an assistant professor history, who is also a Savannah State alumna, for taking on leadership and development of our newly enhanced Honors Program at SSU.

The honors college will respond to the educational needs of curious and ambitious minds and also serve as a laboratory for educational innovations that will be implemented for the entire student body. Most of these students come in with and retain their HOPE and other academic scholarships throughout their years.

Savannah State’s presence is good for the Savannah economy and our second Strategic Priority, Community and Economic Development, ensures that it remains so. Annually, Savannah State University pumps approximately $148 million into our region’s economy. Savannah State is a strong community partner that makes a difference in the lives of this community.

One example is the Community Engagement Initiative Grant, introduced last year, by Dr. Robert Smith, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. This is a town-and-gown project to promote engagement between the university and its many communities. One tangible result of this project is the restoration and beautification of the LePageville Memorial Cemetery, a historic African-American burial ground located off East President St.
Dr. Felicia Bell, assistant professor of history, included the cemetery and community research as part of the coursework for students enrolled in her Introduction to Public History class. Students then wrote the application to have the cemetery listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Last week, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith joined members of the LePageville community to unveil the restored archway and new signage at the cemetery.

Our social work students in our accredited BSW and MSW programs are making a difference in their internships at many of the social service agencies in the county including Union Mission, EOA, Memorial Hospital, DFACS, Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield, United Way agencies and many other settings whose mission is to help alleviate poverty, homelessness, child abuse, crime, health and mental health issues, etc. These graduates will contribute to the much-needed workforce of professionals who will impact the lives of children and families, and improving social conditions. The two social work student organizations, SWOT and SWIF are actively involved in community engagement and service learning projects that empower and benefit those persons in need.

Our student body benefits daily from the university’s partnership with Chatham Area Transit. (CAT) For the past three years, Savannah State University has contracted with CAT to provide affordable public transportation to all of its full time students at a discounted rate. Simply by showing their valid ID upon boarding, students can ride on CAT anytime and go anywhere CAT goes. The universal pass program is funded by fees that eligible students pay each semester at registration. This partnership serves both our commuter and residential students. The goal of the program is to provide low-cost travel for students and to encourage them to make transit a part of their regular lifestyle.

We are expanding this CAT partnership as a collaboration to offer college studies for the growing CAT workforce. This partnership will take SSU faculty to CAT headquarters as well as welcome them to our evening and weekend classes.

Established in 1971, SSU NROTC has commissioned nearly 300 Marine and Naval officers who have brought pride to our university and have served and continue to serve our country with honor and distinction. Currently, there are 115 midshipmen enrolled in NROTC at SSU. While this number is impressive, it is important that our NROTC remains competitive with other universities in recruiting. In addition to the Naval ROTC, SSU also offers the Army ROTC.

As we produce global citizens our third Strategic Priority is Global Education and Experiences. Savannah State continues to expand internationalization of its curriculum and of the education experience of its students.

We have broadened our study abroad offerings to venues such as Trinidad and Tobago, Thailand, Costa Rica, Vietnam, Brazil and the United Kingdom. For example, five College of Business Administration students – Emerald Hayes, Jasmine Dawson, Chelsea Young, Devonte Cliett and Brittany M. Barnwell -- successfully completed their sustainability certification at
Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in Nottingham, United Kingdom, during the study abroad trip. Also, a number of students have spent a semester at Jiujiang University in China.

Last November, Savannah State University signed a partnership agreement with Jiujiang University in China to establish a Confucius Institute for Savannah at SSU. The SSU Confucius institute – the sixth in Georgia and the third in the nation at a historically black college or university – will promote the teaching of Chinese language and culture in the area, facilitate cultural exchanges and serve as a platform to promote entrepreneurial ventures between Savannah and China. I invite you all to celebrate the official opening of the Confucius Institute next week, Oct. 28 and 29.

We will be welcoming one of our own, a 2001 graduate of Savannah State’s master of urban studies program, who will share his personal testimony about his path from a study abroad visit to China as a student to his being CEO of his own company in Shanghai. I salute Dr. Emmanuel Naniuzeyi, director of our International Education Center, and his staff for continuing to recognize the value of global competitiveness. Our formal ribbon-cutting ceremony will begin at 4 p.m. on Oct. 29 in front of the Asa Gordon Library – the home of the Confucius Institute – and from there we will move into the Kennedy Building auditorium for an evening of cultural entertainment and presentations.

Our 4th Strategic Priority is Sustainability and Resources.

Savannah State University has noteworthy programs in the STEM fields – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. These programs often come with research and scholarship dollars for our students, and require modern, state-of-the-art facilities in which to carry out some of the cutting-edge research mentioned previously. Thanks to a $2.5 million appropriation from the state of Georgia, Savannah State is able to move forward with the design phase of a new marine sciences and technology lab building and renovation of the Italian Club property to house the College of Sciences and Technology STEM programs.

The design phase of the $16 million project is expected to be completed by late spring, followed by the beginning of construction; project completion is expected near the end of 2016 or early part of 2017.

Providing quality customer service has been my mantra from day one. It is echoed by the University System of Georgia through the Chancellor’s Service Excellence Award, which seeks to commend employees for going “above and beyond their normal job responsibilities.” Recipients are nominated by fellow employees who have taken note of the extraordinary efforts being made by their colleagues. On October 10, 2014, the USG awards were presented to Dr. Gary Guillory and Ms. Tameka McDaniel, who both work in Student Support Services (SSS).

Dr. Guillory received the Silver Award for Service Excellence Ambassador of the Year and Ms. McDaniel received the Gold Award for Outstanding Service Excellence. Their service to the Savannah State University community goes above and beyond what is required on a daily basis,
and they have, and continue to serve as true “customer service role models.” These two stellar employees represent SSU & USG’s commitment to consistently exceed customer service expectations. Please join me in congratulating them.

Last year, the university commissioned Phillip Blount and Associates to conduct a comprehensive Southeastern United States salary study to address issues of compression and competitive salary rates for every position at the university. As a result, the university received a report that prescribes a salary range for every position we have. We discovered that many of our colleagues at the lower end of the spectrum were working for a level of pay that none of us could be proud of. In October of 2013, vice president for business and financial affairs, Edward Jolley, provided a plan of raising the pay of every employee on campus making less than $18,400 annually. In January, 57 hourly employees received an hourly rate increase while 18 staff and 54 faculty members received equity adjustments.

All other employees employed with SSU prior to July 1, 2013, received some form of salary increase during the year for the first time in five years. As you may know, the governor and legislature approved a 1% merit raise and the University System authorized institutions that have the sustainable resources to provide up to 4%. Savannah State University was in the position to establish an upper limit of 4% merit increases. For us, this was an opportunity to use dollars from our growth to reinvest in our people. We provided raises on average of 3.2% and we began to address the issue of salary compression for many of our faculty and staff members. We committed to bring our employees to 90 percent of the midpoint for their position and in doing so, we developed a strategy to give raises of as much as eight percent for consecutive years until we have alleviated the compression issue at Savannah State University.

Closing the Gap – a fund I established upon arrival in 2011 to provide small scholarships ranging from $60 to $1,500, to students in their final semesters who have exhausted all other financial sources – family, financial aid, savings – and otherwise might not be able to complete degree requirements. I thank all alumni and others who have donated to the fund.

Maintaining a safe environment is a concern of every college or university in the nation, and Savannah State University is no exception. Working in conjunction with student leaders, we are always assessing and reassessing our efforts, looking for ways to improve. In September, Chancellor Hank Huckaby announced a new Campus Safety and Security Committee that will review and develop recommendations on matters related to public safety at the system’s 31 colleges and universities. However, in March, I charged a working safety task force comprised of campus and community members to examine current activities and make recommendations about additional measures to ensure the safety of our campus and nearby community. While the task force’s work is ongoing, we haven’t been sitting idle. Several measures have been implemented to enhance patrol and campus policing.

Our alumni and other donors recognize the value of Savannah State University and are demonstrating such by investing in the university and its students. Last year, gifts to the university surpassed one million dollars and the number of alumni givers increased. Worth
noting here is Savannah State’s designation as the Tom Joyner Foundation School of the Month in August of 2013. Savannah State’s campaign was chaired by Mrs. Laura Irwin, SSUNAA vice president and committee chair. We kicked off with the first-ever virtual show that allowed audience members to tap in via the Internet to make pledges and issue challenges in support of the university. The campaign generated more than $260,000, more than any other university during the 2013 Tom Joyner Foundation campaign year.

Recently, at our Homecoming, I was presented with a gift of $40,000 from the Class of 1974, the largest gift to date from a single alumni class. We thank them and all for their fundraising.

Like those who came before us, it is incumbent that the administration of today set the stage for future growth. In doing so, I have invited individuals with national reputations to serve on a new Board of Visitors. The Board of Visitors is a voluntary body of business and community leaders that offers counsel and leadership on initiatives that enhance the stature and contributions of Savannah State University in the region, state and nation. We are pleased that Savannah’s own Mr. Robert Jepson has agreed to chair the group, and we appreciate his leadership and role in conceiving and forming this group, which will be a catalyst for growth and development of SSU. Mr. Jepson is a loyal supporter of Savannah who has devoted many years of service to a number of higher education institutions.

Last year, we embarked upon a comprehensive marketing and branding study. Hundreds of our constituents participated in this process that yielded tremendous insight. As a result of this study, we will launch a marketing and branding campaign beginning on January 1, 2015. We will reintroduce Savannah State University to our community. A taste of what may be our brand position:
We stand with Georgia’s great universities - naturally bright, environmentally green, and fiercely, fanatically Orange.
We are the soul of Savannah
SMART, BOLD, PROUD,
We are ----Seriously Impressive –
Savannah State University

As I close, I am so very grateful to each of you for all you do on behalf of the nearly 5,000 students who matriculate here at the university by the sea. Every decision we consider and execute is one that can have a profound impact on our students for years to come. I take very seriously the responsibility to lead this great institution in partnership with our city, region, state and nation. It’s sometimes hard to believe I’ve been president for more than three years now. Of course, these have been the best years of my working career. And as I reflect on those years, I am proud of what we have achieved together in just this short time.

When I arrived at SSU, I found a very fine institution with a solid foundation, and great potential. And today I see a world-class institution taking its rightful place alongside some of the best universities anywhere. Our students are amazing, and our faculty and staff are very committed to achieving excellence in all they do.
Truly, SSU is emerging as a premier university and it continues to transform in this 21st century to meet the demands of this global world. We continue to reach higher heights because of all of you—our staff, faculty, students, alumni, university friends, and partners in business and the community at large. In January, we will commence the university’s year-long 125th anniversary celebration. When asked about this historical university, make sure you “tell them ... we are rising' 

Thank you, and have a great day!