At 2 p.m. on June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan stood by the Brandenburg Gate, one of eight passageways through a wall that, for over a quarter of a century, divided Berlin. The wall not only isolated citizens of the city, it stood as the symbol of East-West tensions of a cold war. Facing a throng of more than 45,000 people, President Reagan challenged the leader of the Soviet Union, “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate; tear down this wall.”

You know the rest of the story. On November 9, 1989, the gate was opened and plans were put in place to dismantle the wall.

Gates, walls, and, yes…Ivory Towers. For those who build them, they often initially provide comfort, security, and are even a source of pride. Yet, as history has shown us, too often walls limit, disenfranchise, and isolate.

As I welcome you to the start of the new academic year, I am uplifted by the reality that we at Millersville University demonstrate openness to creativity, a desire to dream, and a disdain for walls that would limit our possibilities.

Yet there are those who like walls. They take solace in isolation. The Babylonians, for example, once thought, “If we build the tower high enough, we could hide within its walls and be protected from all external realities of life.” But I don’t need to tell you that the whole Tower idea flopped.

Since we live in unsettling economic times, it would be much easier to turn inward, build a wall, and focus exclusively on what worked in the past. However, unlike the Babylonians, we at Millersville embrace the lines of Robert Frost, “…something there is that doesn’t like a wall, that wants it down.” Such a stance -- one celebrating openness, truthfulness and collaboration -- is one of courage and commitment.

I’m here to assure you that I confidently face the future -- with the mindset that the best is yet to come. I have that confidence, because I know I do not face the future alone. I am joined by your outstanding gifts and talents, our collaborative spirit and our covenant of honest and open communication.

Before going further, let me first share some examples of our accomplishments in expanding our institutional reach by moving beyond traditional walls. I will then outline what I see as challenging external barriers being erected. Finally, I will sketch some broad actions we will take in our shared quest to fulfill our promise of being second to none.

I join the Provost in commending the University community for the progress made in addressing the strategic actions that I presented last year at the Fall Convocation. But we have
more work to do, particularly with regard to degree completion opportunities, embracing new technologies and interdisciplinary approaches, and ongoing work in building and nurturing community partnerships.

Yet, without question, Millersville is a strong and high-performing university. The accomplishments we have achieved together move us beyond confining walls.

Evidence: Middle States reaffirmed the University’s accreditation. The site team report commended the University for meeting all of the standards. Furthermore, it cited our atmosphere of collegiality and civility that exists among all stakeholders within the University as enviable and noted that we should be proud of the culture that we have helped to create and sustain.

Evidence: Faculty, administrators and technical staff worked closely together through the late spring and early summer to make the transition from one major learning management system, Blackboard, to another, Desire 2 Learn, on an unimaginably rapid schedule -- a move that saved a million dollars for the State System. This major migration was accomplished with as little negative impact as possible. The project was not free of bumps in the road, and we’re still learning how to use it effectively, but it shines as an outstanding example of our flexibility and receptivity to change.

Evidence: The Software Productization Center (SPC) at Millersville was formed with a three-year infrastructure grant from the State System that began in January 2008. This is a cross-disciplinary effort involving faculty and students from computer science, graphic design, business/marketing, and communication/public relations. The SPC already claims partnerships with WorkXPress, Cruzstar, MRG Power Labs and Runoff Studios. Early reports -- from just the first two participating companies -- attribute more than $100,000 in sales, $100,000 in cost savings, and $80,000 in new financing opportunities to their collaboration with the SPC. At a recent meeting of community leaders in Lancaster, the Center was cited as an example of innovation.

Evidence: The New Student Orientation, a collaborative effort coordinated by Student Affairs, set the tone for this year’s incoming class. What sets us apart from many universities is the message of community and engagement that our students hear from day one.

Evidence: The University’s Soar to Greatness capital campaign moved beyond the $50 million mark, and, due to success and momentum, it is possible that the campaign time period may be extended. There will be further announcements in early October regarding this initiative. However, I share with a great deal of pride that 250 current employees and 182 retirees have contributed close to $2.8 million in cash and pledges. Those who know us best are investing in the future direction of the University. Your generosity is inspiring.

The final evidence of our success that I will share today dramatically depicts our future possibilities and commitment to move beyond our walls. In November 2009, the University
began formal procedures for the purchase of the 42 North Prince Street facility in Lancaster City.

Millersville University – Lancaster is more than a physical site. It is a bold vision. It inspires and empowers us to think more broadly and deeply about our educational mission in partnership with the larger Lancaster community. MU – Lancaster will become a catalyst for community conversation leading to action agendas. The Millersville experience is not limited by walls.

Obtaining this facility could never have been realized without the dedicated vision, inspiration, and cooperation of members of the University campus, trustees and external community. Many assisted us, and I want to publically thank Chancellor John Cavanaugh and State Senator Lloyd Smucker for their extraordinary support and action in enabling us to secure this facility. We are honored to have many of our community partners who believe in us and support our university here today. I ask the University community to join me with applause in recognizing and thanking our guests for their confidence and their support.

In the face of our optimism, there are always challenges. It is no surprise that external budgetary pressures pose a tremendous hurdle to our mission. This issue is particularly perplexing because Millersville University did not cause the problem. No one on this campus did anything wrong. Yet, as our friends in theology remind us, sometimes bad things happen to good people.

Although we have been, and continue to be, good stewards, we are being asked to deliver our quality education with even fewer resources.

Last year and for this upcoming academic year, we have faced dramatic budget reductions. In the last two years we have reduced spending by $7.5 million. Although the state did not cut the system budget, Millersville’s allocation declined because other institutions are growing and the formula rewards growth.

The Board of Governors passed a $250 per year tuition increase that does not cover all the University’s mandatory costs.

We have eliminated 20 positions for the 2010-2011 fiscal year budget.

As of August 12, we have several vacant faculty positions and frozen staff positions.

In fiscal year 2011-12, it is estimated the state might have as much as a $4-5 billion deficit, and the federal government will not extend the stimulus funds that we have received for three years. Thus Millersville is faced with the loss of approximately $3 million in such funding. The State System is requesting that we develop budget scenarios with not only the loss of stimulus funds but anywhere from 5-15 percent additional cuts in state appropriations. A 15-percent reduction means $5 million for MU; add to that the $3 million in lost stimulus dollars
for a total of $8 million. This does not include the unfunded dollars for the state retirement system that we must address as well.

However, there are several additional challenges beyond budgetary matters that require immediate attention this year and in succeeding years.

First, it is imperative that the retention and graduation rates for our overall student body and our underrepresented students be significantly increased. These rates are, and have been, above the national average for our total student population; however, when considering underrepresented students, our numbers have languished over the past several years. It is important for us to raise the attainment rate for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is the right direction educationally and socially. This does not mean decreasing the rigor that we require in our academic programs. In fact, we must set even higher expectations and simultaneously provide the support systems so that students can meet those expectations.

A second challenge specific to this campus involves our library. Due to renovations beginning the summer of 2011, Ganser will be out of service for two years. The library faculty and staff have begun preparing for this. Through careful coordination between library faculty and colleagues from each discipline, the extensive print collection has been meticulously weeded out. Concurrently, the electronic collection of materials has been expanded. This has been incredibly intense and detailed work, and the results are astounding.

Time does not permit me to describe in detail what will happen when the facility closes next summer. However, I assure you that plans to provide services in different ways will be announced over the coming year.

Indeed, the Ganser building will close, but the University library will not. You might think that the library is at the intersection of Frederick and George Streets, but it is actually at the intersection of scholarship, innovation, creativity and collaboration. And that’s the road to our future.

Finally, for nearly all of us, there will be a third challenge -- contract negotiations between either the Commonwealth or PASSHE with all of the unions represented within the State System. As stated earlier, Middle States commended us for the unusual level of collegiality that exists at Millersville. That collegiality is not accidental. It has, and remains, a part of the culture at Millersville. We must be vigilant in protecting that culture. We have the ability to disagree as colleagues without being disagreeable or becoming adversarial. I encourage all of us to not lose sight of this precious heritage.

So what actions must we take?

In December 1862, President Abraham Lincoln addressed the Congress noting that, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with
difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenfranchise ourselves and then we shall save our country.”

Through these words, Lincoln provides us three key elements of advice as we contemplate actions we must take when our future is threatened.

First, note that Lincoln says we must rise “with” the occasion” not “to” the occasion. More than mere semantics, Lincoln encourages an important attitudinal shift. Rising “to” an occasion suggests an intentional, anticipated confrontation. Alternatively, rising “with,” provides the opportunity to harness the force of change and allow its energy to power our drive for positive growth.

Now I am not promoting a Pollyanna principle. We cannot be naive to our situation any more than Lincoln could be to his. Yet the nation ultimately rose out of the horrors of civil war a stronger, better citizenry, more firmly dedicated to the principles of “We the People.”

The University’s biggest challenge isn’t what we face, but how we face it. The biggest threat to our institution is not the developing realities of the 21st century. The biggest threat is victim-mentality and weariness of spirit. We must face every emerging problem with flexibility, adaptability, creativity and innovation. When a wall blocks our road, we must either grab a ladder and scale the wall, build a new road, go around the wall or tear the wall down!

The moment we stop seeing opportunity in adversity is the beginning of the end for Millersville. Today isn’t the beginning of the end; it is the beginning of the future! How bright that future is for Millersville University is limited only by the boundaries of our imagination. We will rise with these challenges; we will emerge even stronger; and we will arrive with our core principles intact.

Second, Lincoln encourages us to “disenfranchise” ourselves. Now that word is not normal vernacular for 21st-century Americans. Ironically, its opposite -- “enthralled” -- is highly recognizable; we take pleasure in becoming “enthralled” with an idea, a theorem, or a belief. But once we become enthralled, we take great comfort in the status quo, and we relax. Why change? Being “enthralled” too often means that our ideas and coping strategies are rooted in circumstances from previous centuries.

A powerful illustration of this mindset comes from a presentation delivered by noted education scholar, Ken Robinson. During a presentation, Robinson articulated the premise that “individuals recognize the importance of time.” He then asked those over twenty-five to raise their hands and stand if they were wearing a wrist watch. The process was then repeated for those under age twenty-five.

You do not have to think hard to imagine the results. Watches are not a customary part of the under twenty-five group’s accessories. One young person quipped, “Wrist watches are soooooo yesterday; they are only single-option devices.”
The 21st century requires that we disenthrall ourselves of one-dimensional devices and outdated thinking. Our recognition of education’s importance is critical to who we are. But perhaps -- just perhaps -- technology and new pedagogies might prove an alternative or an even better way of fulfilling our mission. Such revelation can disenthrall us from our concept of “best” pedagogy or “THE WAY” to educate. To be disentralled opens opportunities to employ new strategies as we rise with the challenges we face.

External change has arrived. We must disenthrall ourselves of the notion that the state will support us as it has in the past. The concept of “normality” has changed. We have a “new normal.” In our “new normal,” we have fewer dollars from the state and have a need to generate new streams of revenue. In our “new normal,” all solutions must have long-term benefit and short-term relief.

But, even though we live in a “new normal,” in the best interest of our students and the institution, I make this pledge: the core of our university -- our teaching mission -- must and will be maintained. Our faculty contribute exclusively to our core mission and their role must be -- and will be -- respected and protected.

Finally, Lincoln calls on us to not just “think” anew, but also to “act” anew. It is an important first step to conceive a direction or a plan, but quite another to actively begin implementation. To date we have acted responsibly, and, as best we could, implemented proportional cuts. Proportionality no longer remains a responsible approach to budget cutting and balancing strategies. Our resources must be dedicated even more so to our core mission. Pain will not be shared evenly in order to protect the core. Our top priority is instruction and the student support programs that enhance opportunities for student success.

This is not an enviable task, nor does it denigrate the importance of other programs and the good people involved with those programs. It is, however, the reality of hard choices and limited, or diminished, resources.

Bold actions do not happen without careful thought. To that end, we must develop a framework for generating new ideas that will help us propel the University’s vision. We are advancing a framework – one that consists of a three-phase process – to harvest the best ideas our campus and external community can generate. We will implement those ideas, in part by connecting to our established strategic directions and allocation processes. Our goal is to build transformative change – the kind of change that will ensure our university’s and the region’s health and vitality.

Phase 1 will engage the regional and University communities in meaningful conversations that: identify relevant trends that frame a progressive look at our region’s future; and discover paths that the University and Lancaster region must travel together in order to develop and sustain a more thriving community in the 21st century.
It is our intention to examine lessons learned from Lancaster 2020, Millersville 2020, the innovation conversations of the Lancaster County Community Foundation, and other forward-looking community conversations, past and ongoing.

Starting from the ideas generated in Phase 1, Phase 2 will provide focused conversations about what knowledge, skills, and experiences our students must develop that will equip them to address the challenges and impediments to progress; in other words, how will we transform the undergraduate experience to prepare our graduates to contribute positively and productively to our region’s pursuit of ever-increasing quality as a place to live and work?

Phase 3 links the outcomes of Phases 1 and 2 with the results of the Middle States Self-Study. Here the University will undertake a comprehensive review of the core functions and institutional value of our curricular and co-curricular programs. This focused inquiry will determine how we will partner with the Lancaster region in traversing these paths of innovation, creativity and engagement in the 21st century. Ultimately the action plan that emerges must support the University’s vision in an evolving 21st-century context and will prepare the University for the challenges of the coming decades.

We must complete this process by December 2011, for we can ill afford to tarry. Our future requires that we act intelligently, and without endless debate. We must, and will, be in charge of our destiny if we act to address the challenges that we face.

As some of you know, I had an extraordinary experience this summer in leading a delegation of faculty, staff and community leaders to China. There I saw and experienced, you guessed it, the Wall. To see this amazing 3,000-mile structure, towering an average height of twenty-five feet leaves an impression of awe and wonder…indeed, there is absolutely no question that China’s wall is GREAT.

As I think about it, it wasn’t the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, historical temples, or Peking duck that were the life-altering experiences. It was those human interactions that had the greatest impact on me. Let me share just one illustration.

One morning, several of us were eating breakfast in the hotel restaurant when one member of the delegation retrieved a software system on his iPad that displayed a piano keyboard. This piano image caught the attention of a Chinese father and his eight-year-old daughter, who came over to look. Her eyes widened as she recognized the image as familiar keys. The little girl immediately went up to the iPad, and played “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” -- with both hands. She never spoke a word to us; she just communicated through her musical talent. After she finished playing, we applauded and she walked away smiling, hand in hand with her father.

That communication through music, technology and shared smiles, helped knock down a wall. The people in that restaurant, members of Millersville’s delegation and that little girl and her father…they all helped knock down a wall. The wall that fell that day did not require committee meetings, endless debate, extensive funding, or government intervention. That wall
fell because individuals from different cultures dared to reach out to one another and strike a common chord. That image is firmly imprinted in my memory, and I believe in its message of hope in these times of the “new normal.”

Thus, I borrow again from Lincoln’s words, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves…” and then we, too, shall ensure that Millersville University thrives.

The inquisitive nature of that little Chinese girl’s mind and her partnership with people from Millersville stands as a lesson to all of us that removing walls does not start at the institutional or system level, it begins within the human will at the individual level. Just as that little girl, I know that each of you has the resources to scale walls that would limit us.

And my friends, you are not alone; we have each other. Together we can…and we will…tear down the walls, and – oh, what we will build together!