Buenos dias! I am so very glad to have us back together again, one community united by one mission. This past year, I became an Associate of the Congregation of Divine Providence. During the preparatory program, Sister Gloria Ann Fiedler, CDP, spoke to us of the first actions of the founding sisters. As I listened to Sister Gloria Ann, I reflected upon the thought that despite the complexities of issues that we face as educators, our mission is as true and as straightforward today as it was in 1895 when the Sisters first arrived in San Antonio.

One of the first tasks the Sisters undertook was the building of a tower to supply water to the convent. Soon, the community was coming to the Sisters asking for help in obtaining water for their families. The Sisters recognized their call to care for the poor of San Antonio’s West Side. They also recognized their limitations in developing enough water towers to serve all in need and realized that need would continue to grow. The Sisters determined that rather than building the needed towers themselves, they would empower the people to work for their own rights. And they organized and educated the people of the West Side to advocate successfully with the City of San Antonio for water.

Today, we remain united in the simplicity of that originating mission: We educate to empower the people. What has changed and continues to change is the process of education. In an ever more complex world, where the definition of community has expanded from the neighborhood to one of global proportions; when technologies both enhance and destroy the beauty of the world; where community advocacy can quickly devolve into isolationism; it is ever more important that we engage in continuous assessment of our curricula, our methodologies, our processes, and perhaps most importantly, how we live our values in our daily activity.

It is for that reason, that I invite you to join me in designating this year as the year for renewing the university’s strategic plan. In 2012 we adopted Rooted in Providence and its three strategic initiatives. I believe that the initiatives to grow, to graduate, and to lead are as relevant today as they were five years ago. Much has been accomplished since the inception of that plan, not the least of which is the strengthening of the community through collaborative efforts to improve
communication, processes, curriculum, and support services. As we look at the challenges that we continue to face in critical areas – including enrollment, finances, and facilities – it is critical that we come together again to harness the creativity and intellectual wealth that every one of you brings to Our Lady of the Lake University. It is critical to execute strategies that not only protect the health of this institution but moreover, allow us to more effectively educate our students to become advocates for themselves, for their families, and for their communities.

When I think about the challenges that lay ahead, the focus of my concern always centers on enrollment. As we learned last spring in our campus conversations on university finances, our ability to fund our operations is almost entirely dependent on tuition revenue. Throughout the spring and summer semesters, many of us have been watching numbers, looking at enrollment data and making decisions on a daily basis. Throughout the year our enrollment management and marketing staff have skillfully executed strategies based on national best practices. This summer, many faculty and staff from around the university worked long hours and deferred their vacations to contact students, address financial needs, and work out curricula issues. Even our students got involved, using phones and social media to contact and connect with prospective and returning students.

And yet, despite what I might characterize as heroic efforts put forth by a large segment of our community, I am concerned about this year’s undergraduate enrollment. There is also evidence to suggest that increased competition for undergraduate students has caused San Antonio universities to increase scholarship aid significantly and possibly, at unsustainable levels. This is not just a San Antonio problem. I am hearing from colleagues from across Texas and from other parts of the country that enrollment for the fall looks challenging.

In order to continue to progress, we must take three actions. First, we must develop strategies that define who we are and how we fill an important niche, not only in San Antonio but in the greater world. I believe that we are uniquely poised to do this. We are a highly bi-lingual university with campuses sitting in the heart of cities that have been defined by Hispanic and multi-ethnic populations. We are located in a state that is at the epi-center of geo-political issues including immigration, border-town relationships, and the global economy. We are in the perfect place and time, to define OLLU as the university known for societal development within the contexts of individual, community, and political progress. If we accept this as our focus, we need to adjust our strategic plan to build upon our strengths and develop the programs, infrastructure and processes needed to support our progression toward this end.
Second, we must find resources to invest in our strategic plan. We cannot progress as a university if we do not find the funding to develop new programs, hire faculty and staff, and optimize the use of our facilities. We must carefully consider how we can use our current resources to support new initiatives. We also must find ways to generate new streams of funding. Increasing our grants activity, developing our philanthropic outreach, increasing revenue from auxiliaries including increasing the number of students who live on campus are just a few of the strategies that we can all employ over the coming year. In order for any of these strategies to be successful however, we must all be involved. The newly formed Budget Council will go to work as soon as our new Vice President for Finance, Anthony Turrietta, arrives in the middle of September. And I will need you to participate in campus conversations, on planning committees and by communicating openly as we progress throughout the year.

Finally, we must recommit to emulating our founders trust in providence. We must remind ourselves that as we focus on numbers, one number matters above all others. And that number is one. This summer, our staff in Mission and Ministry hosted Encuentro, a week-long residential experience for high school students to explore their call in life. I joined them for the closing session where 30 high school students joined some of our undergraduates to come together in worship. As I looked to see 40 young people kneeling on a hard wooden floor, their heads bent in prayer, I was overwhelmed with my own encounter with a basic truth: that each one of these lives had been entrusted to our care. That in the face of all the possibilities, these students and their families, had been led to us, to you and me, and they entrusted us not only their future but their very humanity. Providence brings each one of them to us, just as providence has brought each of us to serve at OLLU. As I thought about how much of my day, and how many nights I lay awake worrying about numbers, during Encuentro I recognized it is not about how many, it is about one; cherishing each and every one.

My friends, the entrustment of these lives to us is a great honor and privilege. It can also be, at times, a great challenge. As we leave these first days of the semester behind and the sense of renewal wanes, the tribulations of day to day life can begin to affect our work and attitudes toward each other. Our obligation to the care of each student extends to an obligation to care for each other. If we are to live up to the values of this institution, we must be willing to support each other through thick and thin. We need to share in our collective accomplishments, encourage the discouraged, and yes, cut some slack when some slack is needed.
Last spring, we honored the passing of one of our beloved faculty, David Sanor. In her remembrances of him, Yvette Benavides reflected on lessons she had learned from David. While I did not have the opportunity to know David in life, through the words of Yvette, he reminds us of the beautiful spirit that defines OLLU. I would like to share a few of his lessons today and invite you to incorporate these into your intentions for the new academic year.

Lesson one: Be kind. Always be kind. Be patient and be kind.

Lesson two: Learn all you can about the world. Stretch your mind as far as the corners of this earth. Get to know people. Listen to them. Dance to their music. Sing their songs. Use their words to pray for humanity.

Lesson three: Young people are not lazy. They are not selfish or thoughtless. They are learning. They are figuring things out. They need our help.

Lesson four: Praise your friends and co-workers. Recognize their efforts without a thought to what’s in it for you. Their success is yours because we are working together for common goals.

I thank Yvette for giving me these words to share with you. As I prepared these remarks today, I wanted to start by thanking some of you for your individual contributions. As I thought about person after person whom I wanted to lift up, I realized that the list is too long. It is too long because it includes each one of you. You have chosen to dedicate a significant portion of your life to OLLU and because of you, we are who we are. We are a university, a community dedicated to education, guided by providence, living in service for the empowerment of others.

About a year ago, on a day in a week of complex decisions, I turned to the Bible. My hand was led to a verse from Philippians 4:8. I copied those words and every day since they have laid upon my keyboard, to be there as I greet each day. I offer them to you in closing, as a prayer for this new year.

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” May God be with you and with us in this new year.