At the age of 23 and in my first year of graduate school at UNC Chapel Hill, my birth date was drawn as number 88 in the first Vietnam-era draft lottery, and I was drafted into the United States Army. I was the oldest person in my basic training company and barely survived that ordeal. As a graduate student studying philosophy, the army logically concluded that I should be assigned an MOS as an artillery cannoneer, and I found myself on an artillery range at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, behind the barrel of 155 howitzer.

I learned much about field artillery, about both direct fire – when you can actually see your target – and about indirect fire – when your target is miles away. Being a cannoneer, while causing a great deal of damage to your ears, was not the most dangerous job. That distinction, before the era of high technology and drones, belonged to the forward observer, that soldier who was out near the front line, where he could actually see the target, and who directed the fire by reporting back whether the shells were landing short or long, right or left of the target.

During the recent legislative session, I thought often of that experience. While some might find that analogy between the
legislature and the military odd or even distasteful, let me explain. As I watched Mary Shuping, our skilled Director of Government Relations, work in the halls of the General Assembly, I came to think of her as our forward observer. Many among us have called this year’s state budget one of our System’s best, and I would agree. It is noteworthy that the General Assembly gave us some funding for each of the strategic priorities approved by this board. Most notable is the restoration of full funding for all curriculum courses taught during the summer semester. This funding will allow our colleges the opportunity to offer a full range of courses each semester. The major result will be the ability of our students to progress more quickly through their academic programs into employment or transfer to a senior college. This funding is a significant impetus in our comprehensive effort to improve our overall completion rates.

A side benefit, which has not received much publicity, is a better utilization of our facilities. Reduced summer schedules, which have been directly the result of not funding summer courses, have resulted in poor utilization of available classrooms, shops and labs during the summer term.

Another noteworthy legislative accomplishment was our appropriation of $10 million this year and $20 million next year for salary adjustments for difficult-to-fill and retain faculty and staff positions at our colleges.
Never in my long career have I seen more cooperative efforts of our State Board, local presidents and trustees, and other supporters of North Carolina’s community colleges than what has occurred over the past six months in promoting and advocating for our legislative agenda. On behalf of our students and future students across the state, I want to again express my appreciation to members of the General Assembly and their leadership who listened to our case for funding our priorities, engaged with us in many conversations about those priorities, and invested in not only our System’s future but the future of North Carolina.

All of those efforts required careful coordination, and Mary Shuping provided that coordination. I learned early on that she is widely respected by legislators and their leadership. She is known for providing prompt and reliable responses to their requests for detailed information about our proposals. She has an unusual ability to direct our artillery fire. She knows who among our many advocates to call on at the right time and place. At different times, that right person is a member of our System Office staff, a local president or trustee, a member of this board, or one of our many advocates in the business community.

I was amazed at her ability to identify the right cannoneer to talk with a particular legislator, to triangulate the fire if you will. Therefore, I have decided to change her title to the forward observer of the North Carolina Community College System to
honor her excellent work on behalf of our system and our students. Mary, thank you for your most effective and valuable work as our forward observer. I hereby award you our most valuable cannoneer award.

Although the General Assembly has now adjourned for this session, our work is not over. We have several studies to complete over the next few months in response to legislative requests. We also have to work diligently to ensure that we are good stewards of the additional appropriations that we have been given.

At times, some will question the direction or the initiatives presented to us by the General Assembly. I think it is critical that all of us remember that our community college system was created by the General Assembly in 1963. Unlike the universities or the public schools, we were not created by our state’s constitution. North Carolina’s community colleges were created to respond to educational needs that were not being met by the existing educational institutions established by that constitution.

Therefore, the same body that created us, the General Assembly, it seems to me, has the both the legal and logical right to examine what we are doing, evaluate our performance, and direct changes in our programs and services.

Likewise, it seems to me that we have the responsibility, as stewards of their public investments and public purpose, to respond to their directions.
As I have said publicly several times over the past month, the General Assembly is our investment banker. Their new investments in our System, made at a time of fiscal restraint, demonstrate their general approval of our agenda and our performance in implementing that agenda.

We must be diligent in our efforts to continuously monitor and build on that public approval, and I have encouraged our presidents and our local trustees to do just that.

Let me give a specific example of how we might continue and even build that trust. Again, at a time of fiscal restraint, we have been given a special, recurring appropriation to improve salaries for faculty and staff positions that have proven difficult to recruit and retain. Our colleges must respond in a straightforward manner to both the purpose and spirit of that appropriation. In short, we must use those funds for those purposes for which we requested them. It will be tempting to use those funds for across the board salary increases, but that is not why we requested them or why the legislators approved them.

I would go so far as to suggest that our future efforts to gain additional legislative support for salary increases for all our employees, faculty and staff, depend upon our due diligence in using these additional investments that the legislature, our investment bankers, have decided to make in the professionals that carry out our work each day.
Those same legislators also decided to include our community colleges in a statewide bond referendum scheduled for next March, the third time in our state’s history that such a statewide bond has included funding for facility needs at community colleges. While many in our community college family would prefer a higher percentage of the bonds – and who wouldn’t like to get more money to support such a worthy cause – $350 million is still a substantial sum and, if approved by voters, will greatly enhance each of our colleges. I am particularly glad that, again in response to our requests, the General Assembly approved great flexibility in how those bonds may be used. For example, they approved a tiered approach to the local matching requirements for new capital projects, which will be immensely beneficial to colleges in counties designated as tier 1 or tier 2 in the Department of Commerce county-wealth categories. More importantly, they approved our suggestion for no local match requirements for community colleges that decide to use funds for renovation and repair of existing facilities.

I have told both the legislative leadership and the Governor that I will enthusiastically and actively support the bond referendum, and I have been assured by the presidents and the local trustees that they will as well. As with our efforts in 1993 and 2000, success in this referendum will be the result of hard work by the leaders at our 58 community colleges that span our state and reach hundreds of thousands of citizens each year.
That’s why it was so critical for this Board to come out strong and early in support of the Connect NC bonds, and I thank you for the resolution that you endorsed today.

Again, a special thanks to our General Assembly for recognizing the value of what our System does, to each of you for your role in helping them recognize that value and to Mary who helped direct our fire at the right time, at the right people, and at the right distance.