Thank you all for coming here today. This is my fourth state of the University Honors College (UHC) address. I chose early January to give these talks because it seemed the right time for reflection, whether you viewed early January as the end of the previous calendar year, the beginning of the present calendar year, or the midpoint of the academic year.

In brief, I would say that the previous calendar year has been a very productive time for the UHC. Among the highlights of the year, the UHC hired its first assistant dean, initiated a program of scholarships to undergraduate students, inaugurated a summer research program for students with career interests in the health sciences, held its first Board of Visitors meeting, and began a program of Faculty Fellows. The goal of this talk is to draw attention to these and other significant developments in the UHC that occurred during the past year, and to identify other developments that might be expected to occur in the foreseeable future.

Before beginning I want to make explicit the mission of the UHC, which is to provide an enriched education for those undergraduate students who want it. Not all students want an enriched education, especially when they enter college, but most of them elevate their sights once they are in college and sooner or later they begin to make plans for the adult life they want to have and to leave behind the teenage life they had when they arrived here. And whenever the students are ready to take their education seriously, the UHC is ready for them.

By “enriched education” I mean an education with greater depth and greater breadth than might be required to graduate from the University of Pittsburgh with a baccalaureate degree. In other words, they have educational experiences that challenge them to work harder, in return for which they learn more. I have found that most students are willing to work harder if they are working on something that interests them, and so the main task for students is to discover what it is that interests them. Perhaps multiple things interest them, which might lead to multiple majors. Or perhaps it is one thing one year and another thing another year. I believe that college is an excellent place for students to change their mind and to explore – it’s safe and full of opportunities -- and many students take advantage of those opportunities. One of the missions of the UHC is to provide such opportunities to all students who want them.
The opportunity for greater depth is made available in honors courses. The UHC now sponsors close to 50 courses per term, or close to 100 courses per academic year. Honors courses are offered in multiple departments in multiple schools. They may be introductory courses or advanced electives. Their class size averages 15-19 students and usually they are taught in a seminar format.

Greater depth also is provided in the Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) degree. Honors courses are common to all honors programs in US, but our BPhil program is unique. There are six BPhil programs in the country; five confer degree after completion of a series of courses, whereas one program’s degree is based on research experience. That’s the one at Pitt. In essence, our BPhil degree provides graduate level research training for undergraduate students.

Opportunities for greater breadth are made available in the Brackenridge research program, which for the past few years has been running during the Spring and Fall semesters in addition to the summer. This is another unique program in that it is multidisciplinary and attracts undergraduate students with very diverse interests. The number of summer Brackenridge Fellows is more or less equally divided among students with major interests in the natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, and pre-professional schools. The Brackenridge Fellows work with a faculty mentor on an independent research project but one day a week they congregate and present to their peers a progress report of what they have been doing and what they will be doing. One consequence of having a diverse audience is that the Fellows have to present their work in plain language, free of jargon, and so improved communication skills are part of their training experience.

We have set a limit of approximately 45 Fellows in the summer program and we receive three times that number of applicants. Consequently, many more applicants are qualified than can be accommodated, especially students with career interests in the health sciences. Thus, last year we inaugurated a second summer research program, this one for pre-Health Science undergraduate students. That program (called “Honors College in Health Science”) also is multidisciplinary, with student interests ranging from neuroscience and pharmacology to public health and psychiatry. We had 15 students in the program last summer and seek to have 20-25 students in the coming summer.
An opportunity for increased breadth of education also will likely be available in a new Certificate program. Actually the UHC is presently considering two Certificate programs. One prospective program would be run by the UHC, and is designed to promote greater breadth of education. That program was approved by the Provost’s Advisory Committee last semester and awaits the Provost’s approval before it can be implemented. The other initiative is the introduction of an honors track into existing certificate programs. In the same way that honors courses provide enriched education, we envision an honors track enriching the education of certificate programs. We have been discussing this possibility with Larry Feick and his colleagues in UCIS and I remain hopeful that an honors track can be introduced into their certificate programs. The enriched Certificate would be highlighted by honors courses and a capstone experience in which a written document is prepared and defended before a faculty committee.

A unique feature of both certificate programs is the availability of team-taught courses. Two kinds of courses are envisioned. One kind is a “multidisciplinary course”, by which I mean a single complex issue is approached in the course from multiple disciplinary perspectives. For example, for years the UHC has been running a summer field course in property we own in southeastern Wyoming. The course is taught by multiple faculty members with overlapping interests and expertise in Ecology, Geology, and Paleontology. Such multidisciplinary courses encourage the same sort of exciting collaborative interaction that occurs when a faculty member in one discipline finds a research colleague with overlapping interests in another discipline, and their joint work enables them to do something together that they could not have done separately. We want to bring that excitement and broad expertise into the classroom.

The other kind of team-taught course is “interdisciplinary”, by which I mean different instructors represent different disciplines but there is no common focus. For example, next Fall I will be teaching neuroscience in such a course with Seymour Drescher from the Department of History, who will discuss slavery in colonial America, and with Paul Bove from the Department of English, who will discuss 20th century American poetry with a focus on Wallace Stevens. You will notice that these three topics are not obviously related. But the three of us will be present at all class meetings (as opposed to serial teaching, where one faculty member leaves when another arrives). Moreover, we will participate in class discussions about the similarities and differences across research and scholarship
in our different disciplines be present at all class meetings. A limited number of these team-taught courses are being offered this semester, but more of them are planned to be offered in the next academic year.

The development of honors programs such as these is an example of the way in which the UHC provides an attractive set of educational opportunities for the large number of talented undergraduate students now on campus. Many of those students showed great potential as college students and were offered scholarships by the Office of Admissions. Other students developed exceptional talents and work habits once they arrived here, and nobody should be surprised when that happens. In fact, one of the reasons students go to college is to develop in these ways. Last Spring the UHC began to offer scholarships to undergraduate students who did not receive scholarship aid as incoming freshmen or as transfer students but whose record of academic success at Pitt has been terrific. This scholarship program will continue during the present term and beyond.

The UHC initiated a different award program two years ago to make explicit the three principle values of the UHC, which are academic attainment, intellectual curiosity, and a concern for others in the community. Note that this award is much more than an award for a high GPA. We do want students to be high achievers, but we also want to recognize students who are intensely interested in understanding the things they want to understand (which is what we mean by “intellectual curiosity”). And, in addition, we also want to encourage them to use their talents and academic expertise not only to further their own position but to help others in the community. In other words, we are not just promoting opportunities; we are also fostering the responsibilities of community citizenship. The award is named the Alec Stewart Student Achievement Award, in honor of Alec Stewart, the founding dean of the UHC. In each of the past two years a faculty committee selected four junior undergraduate students who best exemplified those values. Next week that committee will complete its work and select this year’s winners of the Stewart Award.

These programs are intended to stimulate growth and achievement in students as individuals. But we also want to create a community of students who share these values with the UHC and with each other. Critical to that goal is honors housing, which is available in three residence halls on campus that collectively houses
more than 700 undergraduate students. It is in this setting that a community of students is formed, students who proudly describe themselves as “serious students” – serious about getting a good education and serious about their plans after they graduate. (And serious about having fun, too, they add.) Next year we will be leaving one of the three honors residence halls, Brackenridge Hall in the lower campus, and will instead occupy comparable space in Pennsylvania Hall. Because of the close proximity of Pennsylvania Hall to Sutherland West, which is the honors freshman residence in the upper campus, we expect that honors programming in the two buildings will be greatly facilitated.

Although it isn’t apparent from my remarks thus far, I want to make it clear that the UHC is not focused exclusively on undergraduate students. We also want to provide opportunities for faculty members with shared interests and values to participate in the activities of the UHC. Towards that goal, last year the UHC hired its first assistant dean, Gordon Mitchell, an associate professor and former chair of the Department of Communication in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. In addition to his distinguished scholarship, Gordon is a celebrated teacher, being one of the few faculty members who have won both teaching awards at this institution (i.e., the Chancellor’s Distinguished Teaching Award and the Bellet Teaching Excellence Award). Gordon works half-time in the UHC and he has been a wonderful colleague to me while he retains his primary appointment in the Dept of Communication.

In fact, no faculty members have primary appointments in the UHC. But last month we created the designation “UHC Faculty Fellows” for 46 faculty members on campus. This honorific title is intended to serve several purposes. One purpose is to publically recognize those faculty members who have been making significant contributions to the UHC during the past several years, along with our expectation that they continue to make such contributions. By “significant contributions” we mean teaching honors courses, mentoring students on projects of research and scholarship in the Brackenridge or BPhil programs, serving on UHC committees, and/or organizing panels and other special academic programs. I hope that the UHC Faculty Fellows also will serve as ambassadors of the UHC during discussions of academic policy (e.g., at formal or informal meetings of departmental faculty).
These 46 UHC Faculty Fellows come from all over campus, as are the honors students, and that point is worth emphasizing. By not having a designated group of faculty or student members, the UHC is obliged to develop alliances with other units on and off campus. Thus, our undergraduate honors courses are taught by faculty with appointments in Arts & Sciences, Engineering, Business, and other schools on campus. And the students doing research in the Brackenridge or BPhil programs are mentored by faculty from many disciplines. In other words, the UHC is well-positioned to help transform into a community the collection of individual students and faculty who work in separate schools and departments on campus (so separate and independent that they are commonly referred to as “silos”).

In addition to undergraduate students and faculty members, there is one other group that we have begun to reach out to, and that is the alumni of the UHC. Of course, all graduates of the University of Pittsburgh are Pitt alumni, and the UHC does not have any alumni of its own. But a substantial number of students claim that the most significant element of their education at Pitt has been their active participation in UHC activities. It could be some combination of experiences in honors courses, or honors housing, or honors advising, or their experiences in the Brackenridge research program or the BPhil program. We estimate that about 10% of the undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh now participate in more than one of these programs. That percentage is much larger than it was 10 or 20 years ago and it is now in keeping with the numbers of students in honors colleges at other institutions around the country (which is 7-12% of the population of undergraduate students). It has not been my intention to grow the community of honors students at Pitt to a fixed size, but it is my intention to allow the UHC to provide enriched academic opportunities to all students who want them at the University of Pittsburgh. In fact, we recruit students to Pitt by encouraging them to expect numerous opportunities for personal and professional growth and satisfaction, and we intend to deliver on that promise.

It does not go without saying that we very much enjoy interacting with these students, and we wish them well, not only while they are here on campus but for all the years that follow. We want to know how they’re doing and how they view their college experience in retrospect. We want to know if there is anything we can do for them and we want to know if there is anything they can do for us. For example, they could provide career counseling to our present undergraduate
students or an internship opportunity. Or they could give a lecture on how they got from here to there, or a lecture on what has become their special area of interest and expertise. Or they could serve on one of the UHC committees. In recent years Pitt alumni have made each of these various contributions and we are grateful to them for that. The Board of Visitors is comprised of 12 alumni who additionally provide feedback about what we are doing and what we plan to do, and insights into what we could do better or what we could do that we are not now doing. These Pitt alumni are wonderful people – successful, yes, and hard-working, but also generous in providing information and opportunities to the next generation of Pitt undergraduate students. It should be easy for everyone to understand why we want to stay in touch with them.

To close, it is widely recognized that the University of Pittsburgh in 2015 is not the same university that it was in 1987, when the UHC was founded. The faculty is much stronger now – more research, more scholarship, more impact. It should be obvious that it is the presence of such strong research programs at the University that enables the UHC to have our Brackenridge and BPhil programs. And the population of undergraduate students at Pitt also are much strong now than ever before, as indicated both by their credentials upon matriculation and by their performance in the classroom, the laboratory, the library, and the studio. My report to you today is that the UHC is not only keeping pace with that development, it is also helping to stimulate it. Helping by providing opportunities for students to get an enriched college education and then to pursue the dreams they have planned for themselves. Along with advancing knowledge, one of the central goals of American colleges and universities is to provide opportunities for students to transition into adult life with viable plans for a successful and productive future. I invite you to measure the success of the UHC not only by assessing how many students take advantage of the opportunities available while they are here but also by assessing how productive, responsible, and generous they become as adult citizens once they graduate from the University of Pittsburgh.