I am thrilled to have been invited to this Symposium in my capacity as a Chancellor who has been a University Provost, because of the experience I had as a Provost in working closely with our University’s faculty.

I feel that because my primary identification with my University was as a faculty member that sometimes I need to apologize for having defected to administration – it is impossible not to suspect even oneself of having a bifurcated interest! But I must say that what made me willing to go into administration in the first place was a sudden and fundamental recognition that as an administrator, I could aid the intellectual mission of our University by empowering my fellow faculty members, by aiding and facilitating the creation of new opportunities for them – for us – to work together in new combinations.

When I began at Vanderbilt, I was an Assistant Professor of Law with the accompanying tunnel vision. I came to Vanderbilt equipped only with a love for the subject, an addiction to intellectual stimulation, a great honoring esteem for the representative process, and also with the usual desire to make tenure, to create my own reputation, and to secure a place in the world for my family. Those are the usual concerns of a new faculty member, not always in that order – even for the same person! They are legitimate and crucial concerns, familiar to everyone in this room.

But what happened to me in my own story was that over time, as I became more certain of myself, I began to see what a difference a university makes not only just in the lives of its students, but in the quality of life of its community. I began to perceive how a university can transform the world in absolutely incalculable ways: through the effects its graduates have through their own work, as well as through the presence and influence of its research in the public sphere, and how powerful faculty members can be in collaborations that combine their expertise. I began to gain interest on how I could participate more expansively in higher education as the beneficent, enlightening force that it is.
For me, being in administration is kin to the representative process that I so admire as a lawyer: the principle of being an advocate, of being able to organize and work for change on behalf of others. I make my decisions with a love of universities and the understanding that faculty are the life of a university. They are its continuity. Like great legislative bodies, a faculty never turns over entirely. Administrations change and shift, but faculty, tenured and non-tenured, through their collegiality and their collaboration, create the intellectual atmosphere of a university for decades. They set its tone and through the strength and diversity of their talents, define what is possible for an institution to accomplish. So the well-being of an institution must take into account a faculty’s optimum function at all times, because that is what raises the bar for everyone.

Every decision we make for ourselves as faculty, that a University makes for its faculty, should accord with the highest principle of universities: that they transform the world. Universities create new possibilities for thought and for human interaction. They open up solutions for a more sustainable life on our planet, and a better understanding of the complicated tapestry of the universe. Individually and collectively, universities promote a life for humans that is more engaged, wiser, more peaceful, more sophisticated, both more realistic and optimistic and humane at the same time. Universities change, adapt, diversify, and map the future. And faculty are stewards of that mission, enacting with incredible energy these capacities of higher education.

But every decision a university makes for its faculty not only should accord with the highest principle of education – it also should accord with and respond to that university’s unique culture and strengths. Every university fulfills its mission in different ways, beginning with the resources already available to it. Vanderbilt’s culture is different from Georgia’s. But in our inquiry into how to best empower our faculty, we came to a more thorough understanding of our own identity. Vanderbilt’s practices may not all overlap with Georgia’s, but since as universities all have the same wider mission, we need to know the different ways we get to where we’re going!

Vanderbilt identifies as a trans-institutional university. We value, celebrate, and build education around diversity and community, nurturing and investing in a unique structure of centers and programs that bridge departments and schools. We pay careful attention to hiring and growth that supports those structures. The presence and health of those structures, such as the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture; the Center for the Americas, the Center for Nashville Studies, the Learning Sciences Institute, our Program in Law and Business, and a new Ph.D. in Law and Economics, is essential for how we enable and empower our faculty to work across disciplines, and to collaborate with their colleagues who work in fields that overlap and uplift their own.

UGA’s ‘Study in a Second Discipline’ is close kin to this idea, as it forges collaborative relationships among members of faculty, that stimulate innovation as well as serve as an inspiration to public service.
Vanderbilt’s trans-institutional identity was not easy or automatic to cultivate. Years ago, Vanderbilt’s departments and schools existed in a much more ‘silo-ed’ system defined and somewhat dictated by budgetary structure. There was movement across disciplines, but it was more idiosyncratic, sporadic, and individual, not part of the University’s dominant current. So we created out of the core endowment what we called an Academic Venture Capital Fund (AVCF), which we are now renewing in light of the clear opportunities available to us in life sciences, engineering, and technology. Our faculty are working together on the second incarnation of AVCF to identify the key areas where Vanderbilt can make distinctive contributions in research, education, and teaching at this important intersection of schools and disciplines clustered around our programs in medicine, in the sciences, education, and engineering.

Both through and even outside of AVCF we have seen tremendous growth in the excellence, diversity, and stature of our faculty, including in the social sciences and humanities. A number of bold, exciting, and risky ventures have sprung from these fields. The energy of great research, teaching and curricular innovation emerging from these structures is palpable and important.

Of course the time it takes to discuss, learn, and engage with colleagues within and across disciplines is precious for all faculty. We are beginning plans for the establishment of a Vanderbilt Institute for Advanced Studies, where our faculty and invited scholars in key areas of trans-institutional studies can work, dine, conduct seminars, engage in new conversations, and collaborate on new ideas. This, I emphasize, is not during their “free” time — any university professor knows this does not exist — but rather during a time and place dedicated to exactly this purpose, a full semester or year in the form of a sabbatical devoted to collaborative work.

Transinstitutional efforts have the flexibility to address topics and areas that require a more extensive interest than one discipline can provide, for which a multivalent understanding is critical to a more skillful engagement with our world. VU’s new Program in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies is one example. Its curriculum and faculty must be drawn from history, religious studies, literature, philosophy, divinity, art history, and sociology, in order to encompass and allow a full capacity for understanding and the most relevant scholarly work. There is certain research that can only be done in a collaborative structure.

Collaboration is an impetus to reach out across an institution and form relationships that, through the knowledge they stimulate and inspire, can contribute to the livability, justice, and sustainability of our shared world. This awareness that our work has a higher purpose is profoundly inspirational.

We have a timely opportunity now, given our globally-connecting technologies and the crises of climate and crises of war that face us on the planet we share, not just as one species but as beings, to use the unique powers and attributes of universities and colleges — and our own individual institutions in their particular gifts -- in order to confront, adapt to, and alleviate the suffering that threatens all species on this planet.
Universities are often referred to as “Ivory Towers,” signifying their distance from the ordinary day to day pressures of politics and the practical. If only it were so! For better, and for worse at times, even the most casual observer of the history of the American university knows that we are tied tightly to and dramatically affected by that which occurs in the realm of politics and society. Our mission is to discover and teach, not in response to the daily movement of opinion polls or consumer preferences, but to improve in a fundamental and permanent way the state of our world. Thus, we must, in our unique setting, proactively seek to shape, study, and address the challenges that define our world and time: energy and the environment; health care, medicine, and society.

And even our university curricula, they way we teach and what we teach, can be made more flexible, adaptable, and exciting to draw out the best in our students, and in our faculty through interaction with them.

A shifted, deeper, more integrated and participatory engagement with students is another way of renewing our sense of identity with our institution as scholars and teachers. I am pleased to share with you Vanderbilt University’s vision for residential communities known as the “Commons.” The Commons is a campus for first-year students and residential faculty where students, faculty, and staff will learn by living together in a community secure enough that all its members can discover a university that is challenging, fun, and fulfilling. Faculty serve as heads of and teach classes in the residential houses that are part of the Commons. We have witnesses high participation rates of non-tenured faculty and high satisfaction levels of faculty participation.

All of these measures are specific to Vanderbilt, to our culture. They are part of how we choose to support our faculty, to encourage the best from them by offering the best to them, because they accord with our highest principle. So every smaller and more specific thing we can do to make scholars more deeply invested in our institution -- through mentoring programs, family-friendly leave policies that acknowledge the realities of the tenure process, Research Scholars grants and Discovery grants -- is worth doing, because the larger effect reaches beyond Vanderbilt to our world.

The key to engaging our faculty, to engaging ourselves and our colleagues as faculty, is to find inspiration in the highest possibilities of universities. And universities, by their very structure, have the capacity to empower scholars, through their creativity, to enact those possibilities in ever-expanding, evolving ways. The trick, if there is a trick, is to find this essence of the university and move it forward. Change will happen in the externals, in the specifics, but never in the fundamental reason for our being. That is our tradition; that stays the same; and that is what inspires and renews us. Specifics will transform according to how best within one time and one space to address the larger, universal claims of higher education.

If anything, transinstitutional activity reminds us that we work in relationships and contexts much wider than our disciplines, and also that the skills and resources of our individual disciplines are gifts and resources to others and to this shared global community.
Faculty are always the key, because they, because we, bring the possibilities that constantly surprise us, that school us with new possibilities and apprehensions. And the new ideas that they generate are effectively cultivated within a world of activity across the institution, and activity which engages in new ways with the life of students, and activity which takes advantage of the most essential aspects of each particular institution’s strengths.

I am grateful and honored to share this context with my peers and colleagues, at Vanderbilt and at the great institutions which share our mission, which reach toward the same goal that we do.

And so I am truly grateful, then, to have this opportunity to speak to you in this forum, and now to converse in the back-and-forth that is the great virtue of symposia! Please assail me with any questions you may have.