I am honored to stand before you as Thiel’s 19th president. Visiting with family and friends, listening to the music, hearing the wonderful welcomes and introductions, and looking out upon all of you—I could not have wished for a more perfect day.

Thank you faculty, staff, alumni and friends for being so genuinely helpful and welcoming to my family and me. I would also like to acknowledge the members of the community, and extend to you my warm thanks for your support over the past year. Even our Siberian husky, Tiberius, has been thoroughly welcomed to Greenville. Last week, I spent some time at home working on this speech. Out the window, I observed several college students, two neighbors, the mailman and a person I have never seen before stop to give Ty treats or play with him. No wonder the dog has gained almost 15 pounds in nine months!

Thiel College students, Chairman Strausbaugh, Bishop Jones, trustees, alumni, faculty, staff, cabinet members, parents, members of the community, honored guests, friends and family: I welcome you.

I am humbled to be given the privilege of leading Thiel College. Thank you for the confidence you have shown in me. It is an honor to serve this great institution and to help foster an age of imagination and innovation that is moving Thiel College closer to its destiny as one of this country’s great liberal arts institutions.

I would like to begin by recognizing those people who have had a tremendous influence on my life.

First, I would like to acknowledge my father and mother, who raised my sisters and me on a farm near Hillsdale, Michigan. With loving support, our parents instilled values that guide us to this day. Among these are respect, compassion and humility; a strong work ethic, a love of education and a drive to do the right thing. Through their example and guidance, as well as service to others, our parents taught my sisters and me a love of God as well as enormous respect for other religions, cultures and creeds. And with our frequent academic, athletic and bible quiz events, they taught us the benefits of healthy competition and, more importantly, the value of teamwork.

I am sad that my mother, Yvonne, cannot be with us today. Breast cancer took Mom away in 2002, much too young, and I miss her dearly to this day. The song “I Can Only Imagine” that our choir sang was one of her favorites and I requested it so that it would symbolize her influence on today's events.

Knowing where you have been helps you to see where you are going. Three people here today are the living embodiment of that for me. I am very pleased that my father, Royal, and my beloved sisters, Dawn and Kim, are with us sharing in my joy. I also welcome their families and several of my aunts, uncles and cousins.

When I married Annette, I gained a second family who mean more to me than they will ever know. Over the years my father-in-law, Felix, and mother-in-law, Cindy, have become like second parents, and my sisters-in-law Lisa and Jennifer—along with their families—are my second family.
To Trey and Gabriella, my dear children: It has been a joy to be part of your lives and watch you grow into the fine young people you are today. The passion I have for your future is very similar to the passion I have for the Thiel students and I love the fact that you are integrated into the campus life. You both embody the hope and promise of our future, and you continue to be a daily inspiration to both your mother and me, and we love you very, very much.

Annette, the love and delight of my life. When we married 16 years ago, Annette was intent on having six children. Well, my dear loving treat, you thought we stopped at two. But look around you—we have just adopted 1,000 kids and Dean of Enrollment Amy Becher and her team are busy bringing hundreds more in a few months!

Annette, know this: The employees, alumni, community and students of Thiel College chose you during the interview and, once again, I got to ride in on the wave you started. Several years ago, long before my thoughts of college presidencies, people already knew you were ready to be a great “first lady.” That you put your successful education career on hold to assist me in this calling is much appreciated. I thank you, and I love you.

I would ask that Annette, Trey, Gabriella, my father, Royal, and all the members of our extended family stand so that we may recognize you.

Thank you to Board Chair Emeritus Dr. Glen Johnson H’88 and his wife, LaVonne, who helped support this event with a generous contribution and who also have provided steadfast advice and friendship during the past year.

I would like to recognize the encouragement, guidance and counsel of all who helped prepare this first-generation college graduate to be a college president. Specifically, Peter Mitchell, Jim Vinson, Steve Greiner, Chuck Bell, Marlene Ross, Roger Richardson, Louis Eby, Ken Vallieu, Bob Caret, John Reinhold, Mike Turner, Cathy Leavitt, Jack Hayden, Jack & Carol Anne Barker, Mark Gruenwald, Dave Dwyer and Robin Lutz have all been helpful and supportive in advancing my career.

Also, I would like to extend a warm thank you to Sherrie Greenlee-Ogello and the members of the Inauguration Committee and all the others who have helped make this day so wonderful.

When you’re looking for someone to set the stage before your remarks at an occasion like this, you want the best. You want someone with wit, to lighten the moment; with insight, to light the path; and with vision, to light the future. I got all that and more today from former trustee and 1970 Thiel alumnus Dr. Mark Nordenberg. As the longtime chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh, “Nordy,” as he is known to his students, is a giant among the leaders of higher education and an inspiration to me. At this stage in my career, he is to the game of golf’s long driver “Big Bertha” what I am to a chipping wedge!

Finally, I extend an enormous thank you to the students of Thiel College for joining in today’s activities. It is you who provide the motivation for what we are trying to accomplish in “Imaging Thiel.” It is you—the students of today—who inspire the Thiel of tomorrow.
Before my prepared remarks, I’d like to tell you a story that exemplifies why Thiel College is such a special place for so many.

On September 12, 2009, Thiel had its first home football game of my presidency. The game was against Albion College—the same Albion where I was employed for the previous 10 years. We'll, to say that I really wanted to win this one is an understatement!

However, I learned that much more important than the outcome of this game was the way Thiel College and its many constituents worked together to support our students. As we have seen time and again over the past year in our quest of “Imagining Thiel,” I saw teamwork, I saw people striving to be the very best they could be and I saw individuals working together to make our students and Thiel College shine.

Board Chair Dr. Roy Strausbaugh and his wife, Rosanna, drove down from Erie to attend the game and I recall my gratitude as they went out of their way to make my family and visiting father feel comfortable in this new setting. And seeing faculty like Drs. Chris Moinet, Joyce Cuff and Mike Balas tend the clock and scoreboard in support of our students left a distinct positive impression.

Thiel’s 18th president, Dr. Bob Olson ’60, H’09, also was in attendance that day, just as I imagine he was two years ago when he was president, 10 years ago when he was academic dean, 25 years ago when he was a faculty member and 50 years ago when he was a student.

Early that morning our staff, alumni and students on campus were busy preparing for the game. After a lovely tailgate picnic, we realized we had not seen Gabriella in a while. When we asked some of the cheerleaders if they had seen her, they said, “Look in front of you!” The appreciation for them making Gabriella feel special almost balanced the shock of seeing our 11-year-old baby all grown up in a Thiel cheerleading uniform!

For the Albion game, I had the privilege of being named the honorary captain, which meant addressing the team and participating in the coin toss. After Thiel won the coin toss, senior Mark Dzubak set the tone for the game by delivered a crushing block that sprang sophomore Ross Gargano for a good opening return. A few minutes later, Mark scored on a pass from senior quarterback Willie Bova. As a college president and a football fan, I was proud to see a fullback like Mark Dzubak perform so well on the field and prouder still to know that this scholar-athlete with a 3.8 grade point average also made big plays in the classroom.

The Tomcats sealed the victory on a big pass play in the fourth quarter and my family and I got to know several parents as we hugged and celebrated in the stands. I felt privileged to be connected to what was certainly the first of Kurt Reiser’s many wins as a head coach at the collegiate level.

The evening, we took my father to dinner at the Galleria Grille and basked in the satisfaction of knowing that this was our new home. That is Thiel, and that day is an example of what I love about this college. I can’t imagine it any other way.
To “imagine” means to envision, and that is what we have been doing. For the past year, countless individuals and groups have gathered together to imagine Thiel’s future. It has been a process of creativity, innovation, inspiration and hope. Through our Imagining Thiel planning process we have conceived new initiatives and programs that will position Thiel for greatness well into the 21st century.

Although this is meant to be an iterative process, so far we have…

• Secured funding to offer a new Theology & Youth Ministry major next year;
• Begun planning for several other new initiatives and technologies to enhance our already solid academic programs;
• Launched a marching band to enliven support for our campus and sports teams;
• Looked for ways to enhance student life and empower student government, our student newspaper, the Thielensian, and our student radio station with a new license and call letters—WXTC;
• Added five new intercollegiate sports: women’s and men’s lacrosse, women’s and men’s tennis, and men’s volleyball, as well as a new club sport, shooting;
• Set in motion plans for a Greek life summit this fall to strengthen our Greek system;
• Raised more than $675,000 for the new Thiel Innovation Fund, which will cover startup costs for the new initiatives we have launched. This revolving fund will be available to help innovative ideas be implemented over the next 10, 20, 50 years and beyond;

And

• We have seen a 30 percent increase in annual support to the Thiel Fund and, due to the generosity of people like Dr. Jim Pedas ’50, H’89, Dr. Bill Schreyer H’90, Howard ’56 and Kay ’59 Weyers, Leo Phillips ’85 and other organizations and anonymous individuals, Thiel College has now raised more than $5 million for future facility enhancements, including the seasonal Rissell-Schreyer Dome planned to cover Stoeber field each winter.

These are just some of the ideas that have come from all of us Imagining Thiel. And I am proud to announce that these initiatives have led to increased retention of current students this past spring, and a 50 percent increase in applications, a 40 percent increase in acceptances and, as of last night, a 24 percent increase in deposits for fall 2010 new students.

I am awed by the visionary initiative taken by the members of this remarkable community. To “imagine” also means to “believe.” I believe in you, and I believe in Thiel College.
The Thiel Commitment
Shortly after being hired I threw myself head-on into the task of discovering what makes a great college. To accomplish this, I began speaking with countless people on campus and in our community about what they dreamed for Thiel. I also called several prospective students and discussed with them what they were hoping to find in a college. Now, many of you here know that getting a high school student to sit down and have a five-minute conversation is much like asking Arnold Palmer to take up soccer. It’s not going to happen.

But I did succeed in having in-depth conversations with about 200 high school seniors and their parents in less than a month. From these conversations, and those with members of the Thiel community, The Thiel Commitment was born.

Thiel is for life, and The Thiel Commitment extends from the moment our students first come in contact with the College to their golden years as loyal alumni. The overarching goal of The Thiel Commitment is not simply to make Thiel an attractive college to prospective students—which, of course, it is. We have taken it much further, to encompass the entire educational experience.

Both Annette and I are in the first generation of our families to graduate with bachelor’s degrees. Our lives have been transformed through education. Helping young people in their quest for education is our common calling in life. Over this past year, I have been having the time of my life as Thiel’s president. The work we are doing is important, relevant and has the potential to help our students achieve their dreams and advance their futures through education.

Thiel College is so passionate about our students graduating that we are now the only college we know of preparing to offer a tuition-free ninth semester to demonstrate our commitment to student success. All our programs can be completed in the usual eight semesters, but much like one might feel about their own children, Thiel’s commitment to our students applies even if they change their major, or participate in an internship or study abroad experience. We are so proud of the innovative Thiel Commitment program that we partnered with Anderson Coach & Travel of Greenville to put it on the side of a bus to serve as a moving billboard that is traveling around the country.

Thiel Students
Like many of the faculty and staff, I wake up early and go to bed late imagining new ways to enhance students’ lives at Thiel. If having a world class haunted house and Halloween events is required, Thiel staff is committed. If a Thiel student needs an omelet around midnight to help study for exams or help moving in to start their Thiel experience, we are there. Even when a bull needs ridden or buffalo needs hunted, don’t worry as the commitment for Thiel students knows no bounds.

We certainly have a lot of fun at Thiel College, but the real commitment our faculty have in the classroom is where the true magic takes place on this campus. I would ask the students and alumni in attendance to join me, the trustees and the cabinet in thanking our great faculty for their commitment to the student experience at Thiel College.

My student friends, Annette joins me in thanking you from the bottom of our hearts for the wonderful welcome you have given our family over the past year. It has been a joy and a blessing to get to know you, to hear your thoughts and ideas, and to dream with you. I love your enthusiasm and your engagement. And I mean that for all students—
whether it’s enthusiasm for your major, your professors or your research; whether it’s enthusiasm for your fellow students, your club, your team or your campus job—whatever it is that drives you and makes you strive for a greater understanding of the world.

My commitment to you is to make your Thiel College experience as meaningful as it can be. Know that every day of my presidency I am committed to your success at this college and to your well being, and I am dedicated to improving our academic programs, extracurricular activities and facilities to make this the best college it can be for your education. You are our inspiration.

I Imagine a Thiel ...

Let me conclude by sharing that the name “Imagining Thiel” was very fortuitous. In just a few months, we have begun to take some of what we have imagined and started constructing a culture that will allow this 144-year-old institution to grow and prosper beyond our dreams. In Imagining Thiel, I have imagined many things.

• I imagine a Thiel College where students graduate at record rates and go on to lives of meaning and purpose, leading their families and helping communities in ways that serve as an example for future generations of young people.

• I imagine a Thiel College where students like junior Nick Travaglianti use campus resources not only to succeed but to thrive while seeing their involvement in student government, residence life, the theater and other activities enhance the student experience for others.

• I imagine a Thiel College where athletes, including two-sport athletes like current junior Danielle Dwyer, increasingly give us reason to celebrate their academic achievements in addition to their success on the playing field.

• I imagine a Thiel College where alumni like trustee Dr. Carl Hoffman ’69, H’10 use their entrepreneurial zeal to launch initiatives like the Innovation Fund, which not only provides resources to support the recently announced plans, but also provides inspiration and support for innovative ideas well into the future.

• I imagine a Thiel College where the connections and partnerships with the Lutheran church, the Greenville community and local schools and other organizations go far beyond being supportive, but are deep and committed, serving as an example for others who wish to enhance similar relationships.

• I imagine a Thiel College where faculty—like Dr. Lori Moroco—are productive members of the community, but also build academic departments that serve students and bring the dreams of donors to fruition.

• I imagine a Thiel College where music, creativity and the arts are embraced and enjoyed at ever increasing levels.

• I imagine a Thiel College where first-year students, similar to Audrey Rattay, immediately become immersed in a wide variety of campus activities like choir, the student newspaper, Greek life and admissions on their way to achieving their dream of obtaining a business degree and running an event planning company.
• I imagine a Thiel College where our brilliant faculty provides the nourishment, our dedicated staff provides the support, our faithful alumni provide the example and our students grow, much like the bamboo stalk, which at the end of its four-year cycle shoots to a height of 80 feet or more.

• I imagine a Thiel College that is among the very best liberal arts institutions in Pennsylvania, in our region and in the land.

I imagine a Thiel College where the future is today, and the possibilities are infinite.

Thank you.