This January, the Penn community came together once again to celebrate and honor the enduring legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with the annual Commemorative Symposium on Social Change, organized by the African-American Resource Center and featuring a stimulating conversation between Center for Africana Studies Director Camille Charles and veteran political strategist Donna Brazile.

On January 19th, we honored the 2012 recipients of the Dr. Martin Luther King Community Involvement Award at an Interfaith Program and Awards Commemoration. Penn recipients included Wharton student Jorell Brooks, for his mentoring and tutoring work at the Ase Saturday Academy; Eric Grimes, a Graduate School of Education lecturer, for his commitment to social justice and improving the lives of black people; Wharton student Brooke Hinton, for her mentoring, tutoring, and leadership work at Lea Elementary School’s after-school program; and Claire Lomax, Penn Trustee and member of the School of Social Policy and Practice Board of Overseers, for her support of the Pipeline for Promise program, which enables underserved students to participate in social work and policy courses at Penn. These outstanding Penn citizens exemplify the impact each of us can have as individuals, and together as a university, by actively engaging with our local communities for the betterment of all.

I am very pleased to report the establishment of the new Neuroscience of Behavior Initiative at the Perelman School of Medicine. This new Initiative will add significantly to Penn’s strengths in all areas of research related to neurodegenerative disease, depressive disorders, and addiction. We are deeply grateful for the anonymous $16.3 million gift that makes this Initiative possible. The gift is not only the largest ever made toward the study of neuroscience at Penn Medicine, it is also one of the largest individual gifts to medical research in this country in 2011. Dr. Brian Strom, George S. Pepper Professor of Public Health and Preventive Medicine in Biostatistics and Epidemiology, will lead the new initiative. Dr. Strom is also chair of the Biostatistics and Epidemiology department, director of the Center for Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at Penn, and vice dean for Institutional Affairs at Penn Medicine.

At the end of 2011, the Green Campus Partnership and Eco-Reps coordinated the fall Power Down Challenge, an initiative that encourages awareness about and reduction in energy use. Several college houses and campus buildings participated from November 1–20. By reducing their total power consumption by over 20 percent, both the Franklin Building and the Quad emerged as clear victors with more than 35,000 and 25,000 kWh reductions, respectively. Our entire campus wins, however, through the heightened awareness that the Power Down Challenge brings to students, faculty, and staff. Total energy savings from 15 college houses and campus buildings over 20 days were 113,778 kWh –
that’s equivalent to about 9,000 gallons of gasoline. Congratulations to all who participated – I look forward to hearing the buzz about the next Power Down Challenge.

Also in support of Penn’s Climate Action Plan, eight new sustainability projects have been selected to receive grants from the Penn Green Fund. Business Services will use its grant to undertake installation of a water density system for Penn Ice Rink that will reduce its energy usage. The Department of Chemistry plans to use the grant to invest in an innovative chemical inventory management system that will reduce our hazardous chemicals purchasing and waste stream. In an effort to engage undergraduates further in thoughtful discussion of sustainability, the Department of Earth and Environmental Science will create a peer-reviewed student journal on the topic. The Department of Recreation and Intercollegiate Athletics plans to invest in ozone washing machines – cutting-edge cleaning equipment that splits oxygen atoms to create ozone and then injects the ozone into the water – a far more efficient process for sanitizing towels at the Pottruck Health and Fitness Center. The School of Veterinary Medicine’s New Bolton Center will utilize the funding for an energy audit that will allow the Center to build upon work done through previous Green Fund grants. Penn Student Agencies plans to center a pilot bike-sharing program at Hill College House to encourage students to use this very low-impact form of transportation. In an effort to maximize efficiency and reduce emissions, Transportation Services will develop PennRoutes, a system that will allow Penn Shuttle drivers to enter passengers’ addresses and then calculate the shortest distance to reach the destinations. Finally, the Urban Nutrition Initiative’s Penn Green Fund grant will help create Franklin’s Farmers, a network of gardeners across Penn’s 12 Schools and Centers, with the aim of providing 40 workshops on gardening and healthier cooking.

Much like our sustainability efforts, Penn’s applicant pool for the Class of 2016 is looking stronger than ever. We have received a total of 31,127 applications, a drop of 1.7 percent from our record. The average SAT scores of applicants for this pool have gone up by 10 points – yet another rise over our already outstanding averages. The overall level of quality and competitiveness among these applicants is extremely high, and, thanks to the fine work of Dean Eric Furda and our Admissions Office, we are well on our way to welcoming an extraordinary Class of 2016.

This month, we celebrated our beloved Ben Franklin’s 306th birthday. As we forge ahead into 2012, I know that we will continue to build on Ben’s spirit of innovation, creativity, and pragmatism. I have no doubt that this will be a great new year indeed.