The start of a new academic year always brings with it an energizing sense of renewal and the promise of stirring possibilities. This year, students literally arrived with the wind at their backs, moving onto campus on the heels of Hurricane Irene. But the powerful storm wasn’t the only notable occurrence ushering in the new semester. Our beautiful campus continues to improve and expand. We welcomed a diverse and highly accomplished freshman class. A new dean and new faculty have joined our community of scholars. We have initiated an action plan to increase faculty diversity, and we’ve introduced a bold new academic program dedicated to integrating knowledge.

I hope you all were able to join the recent festivities celebrating the opening of Penn Park. As the centerpiece of Penn Connects, the University’s master development plan, this project transformed 24 acres of neglected land along the Schuylkill River into an urban oasis, with four state-of-the-art athletic fields, 12 tennis courts, more than 500 trees, and inviting pedestrian walkways. This is the first time in Penn’s history that by design the University has developed such a large parcel of real estate solely as open land. Penn Park increases the campus’s green space by 20 percent, and the many environmentally friendly aspects of the park advance our Climate Action Plan, helping to reduce our overall carbon footprint. One of the most important sustainability features of Penn Park is an irrigation system that captures and diverts rainwater to underground storage cells, making the water reusable for irrigation of the park. A truly transformative project, Penn Park creates a beautiful new link between Center City and University City, a connection I believe will come to serve as a powerful catalyst for civic and economic growth.

At Convocation, held inside the Palestra because of heavy rain, we welcomed the Class of 2015, comprised of 2,420 students coming from 49 of the 50 state and 66 countries. This freshman class is the most accomplished and diverse in Penn’s history. The number of African American and Latino students increased 22% over last year’s incoming class, and the average SAT score is 2,155, two points higher than last year. The average SAT score is 2155, two points higher than last year.

As you know, one of our highest priorities is to increase access to Penn for highly talented students from different backgrounds and economic circumstances. Since 2004, we have increased our undergraduate financial aid budget by 104 percent, to $161 million this academic year. Almost 45% of our undergraduates are now receiving need-based grants. Last year, the average annual freshman grant package totaled more than $39,000. Currently, grant assistance is going to students from typical families with incomes of less than $175,000, and students from typical families with income of less
than $40,000 are receiving grant aid that covers full tuition, room and board. The Making History campaign, which has raised $3.48 billion to date, includes a goal of $350 million for undergraduate aid and another $323 million for graduate and professional student aid.

Another ongoing priority is the continued recruitment of eminent researchers, teachers and scholars to our faculty. This month we officially welcomed Dr. J. Larry Jameson as Penn’s new Executive Vice President for the Health System and Dean of the Perelman School of Medicine, although he’s been hard at work on campus since the beginning of July. An eminent physician, scientist, and educator, Dr. Jameson served as Vice President for Medical Affairs at Northwestern University, and the Dean of the Feinberg School of Medicine before coming to Penn. His earlier posts at Northwestern include chair of the Department of Medicine and chief of the Division of Endocrinology, Metabolism and Molecular Medicine. I look forward to working alongside him as he leads Penn Med to ever-greater heights.

We also welcomed globally renowned bioethicist Ezekiel J. Emanuel to Penn as our 13th PIK professor. As the Diane v.S. Levy and Robert M. Levy University Professor and vice provost for global initiatives, Dr. Emanuel will serve as the inaugural chair of the Perelman School of Medicine’s Department of Medical Ethics & Health Policy. He also will be appointed in the Wharton School. The rapidly changing landscape of the life sciences requires thoughtful examination of ethical issues emerging from medical care and medical research. Dr. Emanuel will help our students broaden their understanding of the relevance of medical and individual ethics in their own lives and in their professions. Before coming to Penn, Dr. Emanuel served as the founding chair of the Department of Bioethics at The Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health, and from February 2009 to January 2011 served as special advisor for health policy to the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Earlier this month, Provost Price and I released the Action Plan for Faculty Diversity, distributing it to the Penn community through the Almanac. The University has committed $100 million over the next five years—$50 million from central resources and $50 million from the twelve schools—to this important initiative. The resources will be used to recruit and retain underrepresented faculty, with the aim of building a campus community that reflects the diversity of the world we live in. This is a comprehensive and long-term action plan that reflects the serious commitment Provost Price and I have made to foster a faculty community that welcomes and respects varied viewpoints, open dialogue, and inclusivity.

Lastly, I am pleased to report that our new Integrated Studies Program is off to a great start. Established to underscore the importance of integrating knowledge, the program provides intensive concentration on the liberal arts—with concentration on the physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities—to a select group of undergraduates. The ISP program is being offered as a special curriculum to our Benjamin Franklin Scholars in the College. Because it is residentially based in Riepe College House, it allows students to share their intellectual experience both inside and outside the classroom. Eighty-one freshmen were selected from 222 applicants as the inaugural cohort. Faculty members Peter Struck, Greg Urban and Scott Poethig are teaching the program’s fall course, which focuses on three streams of study: Classics, Anthropology and Biology. They will collaborate to ensure the streams converge, providing a broad platform of inquiry for the students involved.

These are just a handful of the many inspiring ways the Penn Community has embarked on this new academic year. Our alumni and friends continue to support our highest priorities. Our campus continues to grow even more beautiful and inviting. Our students continue to be intellectually curious
and socially aware, and the entire Penn community continues to lift the University to global eminence. I want to thank you in advance for what I know will be a year of devoted service to the University Council. And I want to extend a special thank you for your unwavering commitment to Penn. Welcome back, and have a great year!