I am pleased to welcome all of you to Georgia Tech.

Who is this class of 2003? Well, according to the official statistics from the office of admissions, you are Michael Johnson. Actually, only two of you are named Michael Johnson, but there are more Michaels (71) and more Johnsons (21) among you than any other first or last name.

This is the largest freshman class in Georgia Tech history with about 2,300 students, and it includes more women and more minorities. You represent most of the counties in Georgia and most of the states in the United States, and 88 international students are included in your numbers. There are 11 sets of twins among you and one set of triplets.

It’s been a long time – about 40 years – since I sat where you are sitting now. I had just arrived in the big city of Atlanta from the little rural South Georgia community of Douglas, and we all came with some trepidation to freshman convocation. We were told to look at the person on our left, then the person on our right. By the time graduation rolled around, we were told, only one of the three of us would be left.

Today, I am telling you that I expect to shake the hand of every single one of you and hand you a Georgia Tech diploma.

Part of the difference is that in those good old days of long ago, the freshman year was comparable to Marine boot camp. There was no air conditioning in the dorms, and we had to wear rat hats and endure the rigors of drown-proofing in the swimming pool. Those torments have since fallen by the wayside.

But more significantly, I expect all of you to graduate because the quality of Georgia Tech students has increased through the years. 98 percent of the Georgians in this room are HOPE scholars, and 88 of you are either National Merit Scholars or National Achievement Scholars. Your average SAT score is 1305, and six of you scored a perfect 1600. This is one of the most exceptional classes to enter Georgia Tech in the history of the Institute. And the excellence of students like you has helped to give Georgia Tech its reputation as one of the nation’s top technological universities.

We have changed for the better since my student days long ago. But we have also held fast to our best traditions through the years, and they are the glue that bonds the broader Georgia Tech community together with a powerful sense of camaraderie. When you graduate from this university, you will find yourself part of a worldwide network of Ramblin’ Wrecks that will give you instant identity and acceptance and will serve you well for the rest of your life.

The most popular majors among you are computer science and computer engineering, but most of you are still undecided. And that’s okay, because Georgia Tech offers literally dozens of majors across a wider range of subjects than you might think. If you decide after first semester
that you don’t want to be an engineer after all, look around. Tech graduates hundreds of students who are well prepared to become architects, lawyers, medical doctors, business managers, international policy experts and historians. You can even get a certificate in music on the side.

Of course, we are going to make you work. Make no mistake about it. You are going to work like you’ve never worked before in your life. We will teach you engineering and economics. We will teach you calculus and computing. We will teach you how to rise to a challenge and how to solve a problem.

But there should be more to your next four years than academics. More even than fraternities and football. In addition to studying, I also encourage you to take advantage of the opportunities provided by living in the middle of one of the nation’s largest and most vibrant cities.

You are only a short walk from the High Museum, the Woodruff Arts Center and the Fox Theater. It’s not far to Emory University’s Michael Carlos Museum, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, SciTrek or the Fernbank Museum of Natural History. So use the opportunity of the next four years to expand your horizons in all directions and to grow and mature as a whole person.

The poet William Butler Yeats said, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” And I hope that your time here on this campus will ignite in you a passion for learning, that will continue for the rest of your life.

Again, welcome to Georgia Tech. We are proud to have such an outstanding group of freshmen. We look forward to involving you in the life of this campus and this community of learners, and, of course, to turning all of you into rabid lifelong Yellow Jackets.