President Nesbitt, Mr. Mathis, Chancellor Portch, Regent Jenkins, Presidents Mossbacher and Day, ladies and gentlemen… I’m pleased to be here with this auspicious group of friends of Gainesville College to encourage you in your quest to raise $500,000 for an endowed chair.

At Georgia Tech we got our first endowed chair in 1910 when an Atlanta attorney died and left us two-thirds of his estate. Through the years, that original endowment has grown to the point where it now supports two chairs instead of just one.

We are presently in the middle of a capital campaign that has already endowed 32 chairs, and we are hoping to get about 10 more before it’s over. That will more than double the number of endowed chairs on our campus, and it’s an indication of how important we believe endowed chairs are to the quality of education.

Georgia Tech competes in a national arena with schools like MIT and Stanford, the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley – schools that are much larger and much wealthier than we are. We have less to spend per student than most of our competitors, so we work very hard to get the highest possible quality out of every dollar. And we believe that one of the best investments we can make is in our faculty.

Whether you are a small two-year college like Gainesville, or a large research university like Georgia Tech, one of the best ways for an institution of higher education to advance and mature is to improve and strengthen its faculty. Of course, an excellent faculty attracts recognition and respect for your institution from your supporters and peer institutions. But more importantly, an excellent faculty provides your students with a quality education.

The heart of education is the relationship between students and teachers as they work on the subject matter. Even though technology is changing education dramatically, there is still no substitute for that magical relationship.

Teachers have tremendous power… the power to delight or dehumanize, the power to heal or humiliate, the power to inspire or intimidate. Good teachers are good not merely because they have mastered their subject matter, but also because of their ability to make their students into better human beings. They shape both the intellectual and the personal growth of their students, and their true value is the difference they make in students’ lives.

I grew up in rural South Georgia, and my parents never had the opportunity to graduate from college. But they dreamed of sending their children to college, and they deliberately spaced us four years apart with that hope. I was their oldest child, and when I came to Atlanta to get a bachelor’s degree from Georgia Tech, it was a dream come true for my parents as well as for me.
I had never given a minute’s consideration to graduate school at that time, and the only reason I am where I am today is because my professors not only helped me excel academically, but also helped to guide the direction of my life.

So you are right to put a premium on a high quality faculty here at Gainesville College. You have created the Center for Professional Development to coordinate and expand faculty and staff development in excellence in teaching and the effective use of technology. You continue to upgrade your institutional technology and your faculty are integrating it into the curriculum.

Your emphasis on excellent teaching in the classroom is expressed in the recent naming of physics professor J. B. Sharma to receive the 1999 Regents Teaching Excellence Award. And now you are taking the bold step of raising funds for an endowed chair, which is a unique thing for a small, two-year college. But it is an important piece in the picture of excellent teaching that you are trying to achieve.

Washington Irving once commented that “great minds have purposes; others merely have wishes.” Your campaign to raise $500,000 for an endowed chair is clearly the work of great minds. Your efforts have already been affirmed by several significant gifts to your Eminent Scholars Campaign, and I am confident that you will reach your goal.