I would like to welcome all of you to this solemn ceremony of remembrance to pay tribute to the members of our Georgia Tech campus community who were lost to us during the course of the past year.

This year we also hold in mind the Georgia Tech students, faculty, and staff who are serving their country in Iraq and Afghanistan. As violence escalates in these places, they are increasingly placed in harm’s way. And we fervently hope that When the Whistle Blows next year at this time, they will be back home safe.

I have always maintained that the essence of Georgia Tech’s greatness is not bricks and mortar, but people. And this evening we remember and pay tribute to 19 valued members of the Georgia Tech family who died during the past year while enrolled or employed at Georgia Tech. Fourteen of them were members of our faculty and staff, who devoted their lives to educating students, conducting research, and keeping all the camps cog wheels turning, so that we can continue moving forward. Five were students, including undergraduate and graduate students, and an international student.

These active members of our campus community left us in many ways. Some fought valiantly against disease, holding death at bay while they pursued the things they loved here among us. They could have complained about the cards they were dealt, but instead they concentrated on playing well with the hand they held. We admire their spirit and celebrate what they were able to accomplish in the face of their illness. They taught us much about what it means to live. Others were struck down suddenly and unexpectedly. They were gone in a flash, and we were stunned by the suddenness of losing them.

All of them were valued members of our Georgia Tech community, and we recently learned anew the importance of that sense of community during the storybook season of our men’s basketball team. That team was composed of unique individuals, each with his own colorful personality and story. But their success was the result of a high degree of teamwork and a high level of trust in each other. Each time the team broke the huddle, they all said the word “family” together, and they meant it. They encouraged each other and played together with character and integrity, through injury and adversity, through highs and lows. That sense of family radiated out from the team to our students, faculty, and staff, helping to strengthen the ties that bind us together into the community of Georgia Tech.
Our life together on this campus is a tapestry, and each member of our Georgia Tech community is a colorful thread – an important part of the interwoven fabric of our life together. When members of our community pass away, their departure tears holes in the fabric of our campus life here at Georgia Tech. And our daily routines now include painful encounters with the holes where they used to be.

We miss them, and we are saddened by the loss of each one. This evening we pause to honor the memory of each one, to pay tribute to their contributions to our campus community, and to express our thanks for the time we spent with them and the ways they touched our lives. And in the process, we will hopefully find a sense of peace and healing for our grief at their loss.

Abraham Lincoln said, “In the end, it is not the years in your life that count. It is the life in your years.” Many of the students, faculty, and staff we remember this evening were not destined to have long years on this Earth, but we remember them for the life that they put into the years they were given.

We remember them for what they meant to us on a personal level and as an integral part of the Georgia Tech family. What counts for us today is the personal memories we can still see so clearly in the mirror of our minds – memories of good times together here on campus, memories of smiles and laughter, memories of kindness and caring.

A sense of their presence still lingers in the classrooms, offices, and workplaces they inhabited just a few short months ago, and reminds us of the ways in which they contributed to our life here on campus. We remember the skill and devotion they brought to their tasks on this campus. We remember the many small caring and helpful things they did day by day, that changed us for the better, that helped to strengthen the bonds of our campus community, and that made this Institute a better place.

In his poem “Hallowed Ground,” Thomas Campbell wrote, “To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die.” These members of our community still live in the hearts of the family and friends who are gathered here. Our lives are richer because we had the opportunity to know them, and we will always hold them close in memory.

The Georgia Tech Whistle is an old factory steam whistle that has been an integral part of life here on campus for more than 100 years. It is both a source and a symbol of our most valued traditions. We get up by the whistle, and it keeps us on schedule throughout the day, as it blows at five minutes before the hour, signaling the change of classes.

We also blow the whistle to commemorate special events, like when the Yellow Jackets win on Grant Field, or when our centennial campaign reached its successful conclusion. These have been special celebrations in the life of our campus.
And we blow it each year in April in a more somber tradition to pay special tribute to the lives of the active members of the Georgia Tech community who passed away during the prior year. Today we continue that tradition as a formal and solemn way to acknowledge the contribution made by these 19 members of our community to our life together on this campus, and say farewell to them.

In our regular, daily routine, the final blast of the whistle sounds at five minutes before six each evening. After that, the whistle falls silent until five minutes before seven the next morning. Tonight we will conclude this memorial tribute by breaking that silence and sending 19 blasts floating on the evening air in memory of these lives that had special meaning to us.

And when the whistle resumes its regular schedule of blowing at five minutes before the hour tomorrow morning, those routine blasts will have a deeper meaning for each of us. Each time the whistle sounds in the days to come, it will continue to remind us of those we loved and have lost, but who still live in our hearts and who we still hold close in memory.

We are going to light candles in memory of each one of them. And we know that the light from contributions these 19 people have made to Georgia Tech and to their family and friends will continue to shine on our campus and in our lives. At this time I am going to light the Unity Candle, representing the collective spirit of this Institute of which they were a part and to which they contributed.