Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, colleagues. First, to those new Presidents or Chancellors, congratulations on completing your 1st or 2nd year. Doing so is an amazing accomplishment and hopefully it has been rewarding for you, your family, and your campus. For me it has been an honor to serve. I continue to remind myself of this fantastic opportunity to lead a campus. I am also humbled to stand before you as I make these remarks.

It was my very first day, about 13 months ago. I walked into the office and was greeted happily (vs the alternative) by my new assistant. I knew this person would shape my message, my image, my work flow, and all things perceived by all others on campus. She was genuinely happy to see me and to have me as her new “boss.” After less than a minute of pleasantries, and I literally mean less than a minute later, she preceded to show me what needed my signatures immediately. It was that moment I realized I was a face and a signature for so many things. On my desk were new hires for faculty, a new coach, and several other positions. I paused and said to myself, “Oh my. My first official duty as President is to sign my name hiring new people. I will forever be able to tell this story. Who do I sign first: the three faculty positions or the new head men’s basketball coach?” I thought about it for a moment. Then thought about it some more and proceeded to sign my name. I won’t tell you who I signed publically, so you certainly can ask me later. Let’s just say his team did very well and we are even more optimistic about this next year.

A few hours go by and my assistant said she was taking off for the afternoon. I thought, “Okay.” Then she explained that the Governor had given us all the half day. You see my first day was July 3rd, on a Friday, so we are talking a three day weekend here. It made perfect sense and actually described why campus was so quiet. She departed leaving me to do whatever new presidents do their first day in a new office. Of course while she was gone I had no clue how to answer the phone or find a thing in the office. You know, it really didn’t matter. I just went with it
and was just happy to be in the office. Sometime later that afternoon, with campus basically closed all around me, I decided to call it a day for myself. I tell you, I must have spent 15 minutes trying to figure out how to shut down the office and lock the front door to my office suite. It has this unique lock and I couldn’t figure it out. Plus, I was too embarrassed to call and ask, and even if I could I didn’t know who to call or who to ask?!

It was a memorable and positive first day. One of many I would have in my new role. This leads me to what I hope to go over during the next 15 minutes. As I thought about what message I wanted to share and leave with each of you, my colleagues, I thought of several things that I have narrowed into three themes: 1) the importance of kindness; 2) higher education and our place in guiding it; and 3) pumpkin pie. Thus the title of these remarks: “From Kindness Comes Pumpkin Pie.”

In the 13 months I have learned many things. Two such things are:

1. AASCU institutions are much more alike than not alike.
2. We all need more state funding and more students (30 students/$30m).

In this year I have also remembered several themes or lessons from our New President’s Academy last year. Things such as:

1. The importance of a smile.
2. Steering the ship.
3. Remembering “You are the President.”
4. If you were a good time manager before, you still are one now. If you weren’t that good before you still probably are not now.
5. That athletic scholarships are also academic scholarships.
6. That my worst day as a President is still better than my best days ever as a Vice President.

Two quick stories to illustrate a couple of these points. I was a few months in the role and I had a small meeting between my Vice President for Finance, the Vice President for Advancement, and myself. We were talking about several things and the two of them were bantering back and forth. At times they are both like brothers and sisters in a great way. As we were discussing items I randomly reminded the
Finance VP about some renovation work that needed to be done. The Advancement VP joking said, “Geez Kathy (Kathy being the Finance VP). I ask for things and it takes weeks or months. The President asks and you jump right on it.” I jumped in and said, “Steve (Steve being the Advancement VP), I have been a VP many years. It is different (being the President)!” We all laughed.

One other short story -- I had been in the role for about six weeks when I was asked for my signature for the diplomas. I didn’t think anything of it. Then a few weeks later I actually saw the diplomas. There, in black and white, was my signature. It was that moment, that exact moment it really set in. I said, “Darn, (or dadgummit in other languages) I really am the President!” The role that we play and the symbolism of a college diploma on one’s wall struck me.

Folks, we really are the Presidents and Chancellors -- and our words and smiles really do matter. There is a simplicity to our work. There is also great value to our kindness. Like many of you I wake up every day and remember what a gift I have been given. A gift to be one of only about 3,500 public university presidents. Many try and only a few are so rewarded. I remind myself each day to stay humble. To smile. To play with the children of our faculty and staff. To laugh. To not screw this up. And, to lead with kindness.

Now what do I mean? Just because many of us have had to cut positions and balance budgets this year does not mean we have to be unkind about it. The personnel at our universities consists of our parents, our grandparents, and our neighbors. They are also connected to or related to others throughout our community, and while we may no longer be able to employ them, we still could be kind to them. Honest with them. Respectful to them.

Each day we get to inspire others whose sole purpose is to inspire students. Our future leaders.

☐ Who is the CEO of Walmart?
☐ The superintendent of your local school district?
☐ Your mayor?
☐ Your pastor?
☐ Who is the person you see when ill?
Or send your children to -- or grandchildren to each day to learn from in school?

What do they have in common?

They are all college graduates and we, as university presidents, have the duty to inspire this learning for the greater benefit of our societies. Why? Because the next energy source will likely be discovered by a college graduate. The cure for AIDS/HIV will likely be discovered by a college graduate. Water, and the protection of that water will be developed by a college graduate. And, leadership, whether local or global, will be a college graduate. That new energy source, and that college graduate, may come from one of our universities. Or, they may be the son or daughter of one of our future graduates. We don’t know. I just know I have an obligation to do my part because that student that I keep may be the one that saves the planet or a loved one in the future. Our kindness, support, and genuineness to students does matter.

Allow me to shift to higher education and our role within it. As a President I have struggled in how to assert a national perspective into my work. As you just heard, I once served as an elected president for a national higher education organization. With that role came a perspective on national trends or issues, and over time, I have seen myself wanting to speak out on some topics. Then a bell goes off in my head. You all know that bell.

“Shut up Tom!” <Insert your own name here – Don’t just use mine!!!>
“Keep your job and your mouth shut Tom!”
“Stay focused on your campus and students Tom!”
“Be careful Tom!”

These are wise reminders in my head, based on experiences that remind me to continue to build the foundation and to do as I have been asked. Still, as presidents we are faced with many institutional and structural challenges that we, collectively, are in the best place to raise public awareness. What am I talking about? Here is a short list.

1. Value of public higher education. (*Public debt vs Private debt*)
2. Access and affordability. (*30 years have we ever had new money?*)
3. College completion. (*Success based on a math class or math score*)
5. Sexual Assault
6. Fraternities
7. Mandated regulations.
8. Terrorism.
9. Campus infrastructures.
10. Succession planning.
11. Mental health.

This is just a short list but a list, nonetheless, of topics we are addressing daily on our campuses and through our leadership.

Singularly it is challenging for one president to raise a unified concern, but as a body don’t we have some obligation to address these items, or put a different way, to educate our communities about what they really mean and why they warrant discussion, understanding, or action? We understand these items as well if not better than most in the world and are the only ones that can balance the issue with a practical resolution that best serves a campus and a community. Today, at my campus, we do so much with the 17% general funding we receive from the state. I do not allow myself to imagine what I could do with 18%. Or 30%. The students and families we could help and the graduates we could produce would be transformative. As Presidents I am suggesting we find our voices, call it old school president voices, and use those voices to shape our profession for the better. Our institutions provide access and opportunity to a large community, and in doing so we really, really, really build the foundations of our society.

Let me close rapidly as I talk about “pumpkin pie.” Yes, pumpkin pie. Pumpkin pie remains one of my earlier memories. It was my mother teaching her son (me) how to bake at a very young age. On this particular day we baked pumpkin pie. There was no package. There was no Google or cooking.com webpage. This wasn’t easy bake either. This was from scratch and it was a process. A carefully followed process that included inexact measurements. It was a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Stir about this long until it looks kinda like this. Spread it around. Bake it for about this long or until the toothpick isn’t moist, etc. You get the idea. We do a lot of that in our work not knowing the positive impact we might have on others. Let me share with you one final story about a student I unknowingly impacted.
<Phil Story>

I share that story because our work is a process of inexact measurements. It is a process where we have learned that we can make pumpkin pie more than one way. And, it still tastes good. Why did Phil remember that sentence – a sentence that has guided him many years? I don’t know. What inexact process did I use in building our relationship? I don’t know. Phil is my success story only because he told me. Each of us has a story of students we have positively impacted that we may or may not know about. That is the joy of our work and why what we say and how we say it matters so much.

Ladies and gentlemen. Colleagues. I wake up every morning and am reminded of the gift I have been given. To be a university president and to lead with kindness.

May great fortune be upon you for many years. Thank you.

Dr. Tom Jackson, Jr. is the 10th President of Black Hills State University located in Spearfish, South Dakota. He started his duties July 3, 2014 and has lead with integrity while remaining innovative, visible, and available throughout campus.