At its founding in 1910, the institution that would become North Carolina Central University offered fourteen courses in English composition and literature as part of a general course of study designed primarily to produce ministers, teachers, and school administrators. Three faculty members were responsible for these classes, one of whom was Dr. Cadd Grant O’Kelly, in whose honor O’Kelly-Riddick Stadium is named. In the 1920s, four new teachers were added, including Dr. Pauline Francis Newton, who came to the college in 1924 and who, along with Dr. W. Edward Farrison, is recognized in the naming of the Farrison-Newton Communications Building, the current home of the Department of English and Mass Communication. In these early days, the English faculty also taught in other disciplines. O’Kelly, for example, taught courses in Latin and education, and Newton taught courses in mathematics.

The Department of English was formally organized in the 1938-1939 school year with the arrival of its first chair and founder of its graduate program, Dr. W. Edward Farrison. Farrison was a nationally recognized literary scholar whose critical biography of African American author William Wells Brown is still one of the standard works on the subject. In 1937 he had been one of the founders of the College Language Association (CLA), the national organization that provided an outlet for African American scholarship at a time when it was largely ignored in the academic world. Farrison molded the department, expanding its program and demanding high standards from other faculty and students many of whom would later return to the university as faculty members themselves. Among them are Dr. Patsy B. Perry and Dr. Arthrell D. Sanders, both of whom became chairs of the department. It is fair to say that Farrison, more than any other individual, defined the character and spirit of the Department of English in the twentieth century.

One of Dr. Farrison’s first goals was to establish a solid M.A. program, and under his direction the department instituted a wide range of graduate courses in English and American literature. In 1944, the first course in Poetry and Prose by American Negroes was offered. The graduate program was a rigorous one, requiring extensive course work and a substantial thesis based on a major research project. One of its first graduates was Ila J. Blue, later Dr. Ila J. Blue, who became a teacher in the department in 1945 and who remained until 1979, her chief areas of responsibility being English Education and Shakespeare. To meet the needs of this young, but flourishing department twenty-four new faculty members were employed in the first ten years of Farrison’s leadership. Among them were writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, who taught for one year, from 1939 to 1940; Dr. Richard Barksdale, later Professor of English at the University of Illinois and highly regarded authority on African American literature; and Dr. Charles A. Ray, who would eventually succeed Farrison as second chair of the department. With this rapid expansion more space became a necessity, and in 1952 the Department of English moved from its original location in the Hoey Administration Building to the first and second floors of the Classroom Building. Here, while faculty members still shared not only offices, but desks, they were certainly less crowded and confined than in those early years.

In 1960 Dr. Farrison retired from his position as departmental chair, though he continued for several more years as a part-time professor, teaching Advanced Grammar, Advanced Composition, and History of the English Language. The new chair was Dr. Charles A. Ray, who had come to the then North Carolina College in 1943 to serve as Director of Public Relations. Ray guided the department through two decades of national tumult and upheaval, supervising further expansion and instigating changes which permanently altered the operation of the department. In the 1970s, in line with developments on the national scene, new undergraduate courses were introduced, many of them based on a fresh, interdisciplinary approach. While traditional courses in grammar, composition, and literature remained firm requirements, electives now included such courses as Philosophy and Literature, Religion and Literature, Introduction to the Humanities, and Film Criticism. In 1972 Poetry and Prose by American Negroes, later developed into a two-semester course entitled African American Literature, became a required course. In 1974 Dr. Gershon Fiawoo taught the first course in creative writing.

The most far-reaching innovation in these years was the opening of a new concentration when Dr. Ray promoted and oversaw the development of a curriculum in mass communication. The concentration, formally established in 1977, was headed by Dr. Andrew M. “Mac” Secrest, one of President Kennedy’s Civil Rights mediators in the early 1960’s and a journalist of twenty-five years’ experience. Secrest trained a small cadre of English teachers to teach journalism and media courses, develop the expanded mass communication curriculum, and in 1976 establish the first computerized university journalism lab in North Carolina. In 1985 this newsroom was named in honor of Dr. Charles A. Ray. The school newspaper was housed in the lab, giving journalism students the opportunity to acquire the technical skills of computer typesetting and layout. In addition to their media-journalism courses, students in the concentration were still required to take courses in language and literature, thus combining the new concentration with traditional English studies.
In 1976 the Department of English once again shifted its location, moving to the third floor of the brand new Communications Building. Here, in addition to the newsroom, facilities included a lecture room, a faculty lounge/conference room, and a library. Under the leadership of Dr Muriel J. Mellown, professor and scholar in the department, the library was quickly supplied with books, professional journals, and audiovisual aids, all the result of donations and all available to faculty and students alike. Not the least of the advantages of the new building was that faculty members now had individual offices.

Dr. Ray retired in 1979 to be followed by Dr. Patsy B. Perry, who had first come to the school as an undergraduate and who directed the department for the next eleven years. Of the many innovations during her leadership the most significant was the establishment of the Computer Writing Center. In 1985 Dr. Kenneth L. Chambers joined the faculty with the charge of finding appropriate funds and setting up the center. Between 1986 and 1988 computer facilities were available only in the Jones Building in a small lab operated by the School of Library Science, but in the summer of 1988 with funding from a Title III grant, the English Computer Writing Center opened. In that first year more than half of the sections of English Composition were computer assisted, and in addition the Center provided help for students in other courses and other departments, rapidly becoming one of the most heavily used facilities on campus. Another important change at this time was the disbandment in 1987 of the Academic Enrichment Center (formerly the Academic Skills Center) and the transfer of its writing and speech teachers to the Department of English. In 1988 the Communications Skills Enhancement Program was inaugurated to provide help for students hitherto assisted in the Enrichment Center.

Several other notable events marked Dr. Perry’s administration. In 1983, under the direction of Dr. Winifred Stoelting, the NCCU Alpha Sigma chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, a national honor society for students of English language and literature, was chartered. Amy Becker-Chambless was elected Southern Eastern Vice President of that organization. In 1985, Perry led the department in hosting a Symposium on African American Literature at which Dr. Richard Barkdsdale was the keynote speaker. During Homecoming 1989, the department’s Golden Anniversary celebration included, among other activities, an all-day seminar on the play The Sty of the Blind Pig, produced by the Department of Drama for its own fortieth anniversary, and an address by tennis star Arthur Ashe, author of A Hard Road to Glory. Honorary Chair of the celebration was Dr. Pauline Newton, then in her ninetieth year, who had served in the department from 1924 to 1963.

Dr. Perry resigned as departmental chair in 1990 in order to resume her position as Professor of English. She was succeeded by Dr. Arthrell D. Sanders, who served as Interim Chair for one year. Sanders ably directed the department, ensuring smooth operation during the transition period. The number of faculty was further increased at this time as she hired Mr. Milton Jordan, Mr. Charles Spelman, and Dr. Robert Nowell to teach media-journalism courses and Mrs. Frances Nelson to direct the Computer Writing Center.

The year 1991 saw the arrival of Dr. Arlene Clift-Pellow, who came to the department to serve as its fifth chair. In that decade departmental organization and curriculum underwent further modifications as necessitated both by the ever increasing demands for courses in media-journalism and by the need to broaden the literature offerings. In the 1996 University Catalog, the Department of English distinguished two separate programs, the General English Program and the English Secondary Education Program. Within the General Program four concentrations now became available: literature, electronic media, journalism, and media communication. To expand the range of these concentrations new courses were added in each area. Such major changes did not detract from scholarly pursuits and professional activities. The Departments of English and Modern Foreign Languages hosted the annual National CLA Convention in April 1994, organizing a three-day program of lectures and discussions with the novelist Paule Marshall as keynote speaker. (These Departments had brought the CLA Convention to North Carolina Central University for the first time in 1968.) In 1997 special funding made possible a Summer Enrichment Program, directed by Dr. Sandra A. Vavra, to provide a writing workshop for elementary school children. Sadly, it was two sudden and unexpected deaths that led to the establishment of an annual lecture series.

In 1998, the first Mason-Sekora lecture was held to honor alumnus Dr. Ernest Mason (1947-1995) and Dr. John Sekora (1939-1997), both long-time members of the department and both highly esteemed as scholars and teachers. In recognition of their many contributions to academic life the series has continued every year with addresses by distinguished speakers.
Throughout the department’s history, members of the faculty have been active as writers and scholars. Zora Neale Hurston published Moses, Man of the Mountain during her term here. Kip Branch was editor of Arthur Ashe’s monumental three-volume study A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete. In addition to Dr. Farrison, Dr. Ernest Mason, Dr. James Olney, Dr. Patsy B. Perry, Dr. Phyllis Randall, Dr. Sylvia Render, and Dr. John Sekora all produced major scholarly works while serving on the faculty and held posts in scholarly and professional organizations. Members of the department have written textbooks used extensively on campus. Dr. Farrison’s My Life, My Country, My World was the first of these. The two-volume study The Humanities: Cultural Roots and Continuities and The Humanities and the Modern World was the work of Dr. Mary Ann Witt, Dr. Winifred Stoelting, Dr. Elizabeth Rogers, and Dr. Ernest Mason. A composition textbook, Paragraph Patterns, was authored by Regina Alston, Jean King, and Carol Murray. Current faculty members are similarly productive; Dr. Ode S. Ogede and Dr. Andrew P. Williams have received national recognition for distinguished books and articles.

Publication, however, has not been limited to the faculty. Student publications have flourished throughout the history of the university. The student newspaper, The Campus Echo, has had a close relationship with the department since the 1930’s and has become one of the nation’s outstanding small-college papers. Among its many awards is one from the Society of Professional Journalists for the best on-line edition in the nation. The department also houses Ex Umbra, the student literary magazine, initiated in 1965, currently advised by Dr. Andrew P. Williams. The English Department Newsletters initiated by Dr. Andrew Secrest, provided a further outlet for student publication.

Over the years, the English Department has provided an impressive pool of administrative talent for the university. Dr. Arthrell D. Sanders was Director of the Academic Advising Center, University Marshal, Secretary and then Chair of the Faculty Senate. Dr. Ruth G. Kennedy for many years chaired the Awards Day Committee. Mrs. Minnie T. Spaulding and Dr. Jean Scales co-directed the Honors Program during the 1960’s; in 1993 Dr. Patsy B. Perry was appointed a s Director of the University Honors Program. Dr. Cecil L. Patterson and Dr. Patsy B. Perry both served as Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. On her retirement, Dr. Perry was elected to two four-year terms on the University of North Carolina Board of Governors. Among the current faculty, Dr. Mary T. Mathew and Dr. Michele Ware serve, respectively, as Interim Dean and Interim Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Dr. Brenda R. Shaw is Director of Title III, and Dr. Kennedy L. Chambers has served as Director of Information Technology. The Department itself has taken on oversight of WNCU-FM, a fifty-thousand watt NPR affiliate that has its studios in the Farrison Newton Communications Building.

In 2007, upon the retirement of Dr. Louise C. Maynor, Dr. James Pearce became the seventh chair of the Department. His reflections and his vision promise a bright future for the Department which is soundly based in the past and standing firm in the present.

The Chair’s Statement

The Department of English and Mass Communication is in the midst of a rapid ascent propelled in part by its internal dynamics-- the young, exceptionally gifted scholars who have recently joined our faculty-- and strongly supported by the salutary changes in campus culture fueled by the vision of Chancellor Nelms. The department is the largest and most productive in the University in terms of both student credit hours and scholarly productivity. It boasts a seasoned professoriate and the youngest full professor in the UNC system. It boasts disciplinary diversity, providing a home for faculty with degrees in Anthropology, Education, English, Folklore, History, Journalism, Mass Communication, Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Speech. It boasts a Mass Communication program that stands on the verge of achieving departmental status. It boasts WNCU, the Triangle’s preeminent jazz station. As important, it boasts the highest degree of ethnic diversity of any academic unit at the University and continues its longstanding tradition of providing the University with diverse and capable administrators. Every year the University selects members of the department for special commendations of their teaching. In short, it is a strong department with all the ingredients for becoming stronger. Real growth, of course, is always accompanied by the real growing pains accompanying the kind of curricular innovation that will prepare the department to
serve new segments of North Carolina's underserved population while improving the services we deliver to our traditional student base. The Department of English and Mass Communication is a microcosm of the University. It will play a central role in implementing the Quality Enhancement Plan, “Communicating to Succeed,” which will be the University’s major initiative over the next ten years.

Prepared by Thomas G. Evans, Ph.D. with the Assistance of Louise C. Maynor, Ph.D., Muriel J. Mellown, Ph.D., Patsy B. Perry, Ph.D. and Arthrell D. Sanders, Ph.D.
The Chair’s Statement by Dr. James Pearce
December 2008