1) Can you update staff on UNT’s repayment to the state?

President Smatresk said it’s an unresolved situation as of now. The chancellor is working with state legislators to find a just and fair resolution. But honestly it will not be resolved until the session. It involves a lot of conversation. I think it’s being very well managed by Government Relations. I tiptoe in when needed, but this is the chancellor’s domain. He is extremely skillful in the area of legislative interactions having served as a state senator. So I’d love to give you a solid answer but I’m afraid I can’t. I do believe we have identified our short-term liabilities as was required by the State and the governor, who said, “Would you please go back and audit yourself for the past three years.” There’s a little bit of good news that isn’t about our repayment, but it is about the level of debt. From the original estimates of somewhere around $83 million, I think we are down to around the $68 million range as our bookkeeping has become better. We’ve audited through the benefits and we think that number is fairly close. Our potential liability over the last three years was $4.7 million and I believe we’ll be addressing that in the near future. Bear in mind that this is what the state has required of every institution, not just ours. And I know that UT Dallas, for example, paid back $4.3 million or so of their liability because they discovered that they had some problems as well, according to a Dallas Morning News story. So perhaps we are not alone in this, and that may help aid and abet a solution.

2) So how can I achieve proper work/life balance when UNT is doing more with less and I’m being told we will all have to work more hours?

President Smatresk said there’s no question we are in a bit of a squeeze right now. And there’s no question we’ve asked you to step up. We have budgeted in modest merit raises for this year. They’re not enough, but in a year when we are cutting the budget, I hope you will take giving raises as tangible evidence of our commitment. We want you to feel respected and appreciated for the hard work you do. We want to give you a fair wage. We will work steadily toward making sure that happens. In the short run, we will have to roll up our shirt sleeves and work a little harder, not to the point where we’re ineffective or counterproductive. But we know there are things we have to do if we’re going to build a better future for this university where we are recruiting better, our revenue flows have improved and we can share it. And I promise you that we will share it.
I'm not the best person to answer about how you balance your whole life. I wake up every morning wondering what good things we are going to be able to do for our students and I don't stop thinking about it when I go home. I think about this job every waking moment. And I try to find good, clean, private spaces where I can enjoy my family and relax. I know that a half hour of holding my grandbaby gives me about a day’s worth of feeling good. So those are the kinds of things I do.

Other than that, I'll say, by next year, as we assess our gaps and know where we have to improve and know where we're stretched very thin, we'll be able to start filling in the pieces so that you can get back to a brisk, but normal workload.

There’s one other thing. Not everyone in every unit pulls their weight. And when people don’t pull their weight it means your weight got heavier. When people don’t deliver or can’t deliver, that’s a problem for the university. And we either need to find a position in which they can be fully employed and useful, or we need to move on. One of things we hope to see is that we have a workforce of people who really care, who really want to be here, who are working hard to support the team. Because by working together, we can each lighten each other’s load. If someone slacks off, it’s not going to work. So one way we can help is by making sure we are all performers and many of us can carry the weight or pick it up on a bad day.

3) How likely is it that merit raises will be given in FY 2016?

President Smatresk said it is likely.

4) When will a new staff classification scheme be planned and implemented?

President Smatresk said the university has been talking about this topic now for a while. I don’t think we are going to have either the time and energy resources to do it across the board for everyone all at once this year. What we will probably do is taking a piecemeal approach by picking off units already undergoing organization change. We have a couple that we have started to talk about. I'm not going to spill the beans on that, but because of fairly large amounts of reorganization, we are going to look at how much reclassification has to occur. And as we go through that we are going to learn the tips and traps of how to do it more successfully and then we can roll it out to more programs. I would hope — and I'm looking at Brandi [Renton, HR Director] and Bob [Brown, VP for Finance
I would hope that we are going to hear that we have gotten through most of our reclassifications. I’m willing to be advised. I know that it’s tricky stuff. Is that fair, Brandi? Bob? About a year? So by next year this time hopefully we’ll be on the tail end of the exercise.

5) When are we getting baseball?

President Smatresk said, let me answer that question with a question … as soon as we produce enough football revenue to afford it.

6) I would just like to know how close you are to becoming the most tweeted [university] president in the United States.

President Smatresk said that’s an awesome question. Sadly because I’m kind of a competitive person, the most tweeted [university] president in the U.S. is a fellow named Santa J. Ono, president of University of Cincinnati and he has 35,000 [as of October 2014] followers, which means as soon as he tweets anything it automatically gets amplified a lot. I’m closing in on 2,000 [as of October 2014], and if you all sign up today, I might hit that number today! You guys and your retweets and what you send are making an impact and it’s pretty cool. And we’ve got to convert that into more students and more money. So thank you.

7) I’ve heard a rumor that you are in contention for some sort of dance competition and that potentially the voting has not closed. So I was wondering if you or some would like to provide some details to this particular group about how we might go and vote to see you dance.

President Smatresk joked that he would take no more questions. This event is over! If I’m not in that competition, it’s OK with me. I don’t seem to have any details on how that occurs. Next question. Are there any other questions about you, your units, your university?

8) I was just going to ask a question about how the Union construction is going. Is it on schedule, things like that?

Well, Elizabeth [With, VP for Student Affairs] is on top of that. So, Elizabeth, why don’t you give us an answer, and then, I don’t know, should we talk about former alum maybe helping out on that one?
Elizabeth With, VP for Student Affairs, said there are several alums we hope will help contribute to the Union. We are on budget, which is the most important thing, and we are on time. Plans continue to move along. As you come by every day, you can see that we are making progress and many people are working hard for our students to pull this facility together by August [2015], and we are really pleased about that. The donor that the president mentioned is Jesús Moroles and he is a sculptor, if you don’t know or unaware of him. He’s an internationally famous sculptor and an alum. He wants to help us with potentially creating a sculpture garden around the south entrance of the Union. We are excited about that. He would involve students not only in the planning and process, but also as he would unveil it. So we are really excited about that and are moving forward with that. We hope it will come to fruition.

President Smatresk added that Jesús won the National Medal of Arts, which is a really big deal. And a fellow named Jerry Westheimer is one of our alums who is a good friend of his and who may be the very generous donor for this. It’s great to have friends who care about the university. One of the things I see is that people who’ve left the university are re-engaging, and I think that’s an important and positive sign.

9) In the State of the University address, you mentioned that you were going to move forward and pull all the data together. And that as a university, we needed to stop being siloed and start working together to have the data integrity that the university needs to move forward with system enrollment enrichment for our students. How are we going to break down the silos? Do you have a plan for this?

President Smatresk said these were two different questions but they can be related. So one question is what are we doing about data? And I’m going to say it’s about IT. And another question is how do to break through silos so that we work more effectively together? So I’m going to answer the smaller one first, the data one.

We set an ambitious agenda in the Implementation Committee on IT infrastructure: customer relations modules, data warehousing, financial transformation, classroom software, and high performance computing, backbone issues about the cloud and whether we should be in the cloud or out in the data warehouse somewhere. These issues that we identified are shared between System and us. And so we have been working together, and I’m going to say this is the best collaboration I’ve seen between the System and campuses. The three
presidents met last week with the chancellor and we’ve basically said it’s time for us to get down to brass tacks. Let’s stop talking about stuff and start doing. So it’s my pleasure to tell all of you that UNT, under my convening authority, will be lead on the IT Shared Services implementation, staffed by our people, plus System individuals like Michael DiPaolo [Associate Vice Chancellor and Chief Information Officer] and his team members. We’re going after each one of these problems, we’re doing it together as a System. We’ll sit down and knock heads in a room until we come up with answers. In the case of data governance, you know the problems. We’ve got two data warehouses, neither of which is complete, neither of which is even necessarily fully accurate. We’ve got SharePoint as a flat field database. Well, welcome to 1985. Sorry, Allen [Clark, Vice Provost for Academic Resources], I didn’t mean to insult you. I know it was a hard job, but let’s catch up to the modern world and get dashboards and do the rest of the stuff that we are supposed to do. But one of the things that Allen and his folks have already done is to run the Internal Data Summit so we have our game on and we know how to be good partners. Now we’ve expand this to the system-wide effort. And I haven’t heard a lot of negativity around this. We’re going to commit to it and get it done. And that’s really good news.

Now the longer answer. We were pretty settled organization and that led to a lot of trouble as we tried to move ideas from one area to the next. It meant we weren’t talking effectively about how this plan and this plan could have been meshed together to make it one stronger plan. And those are communication and structural issues. When we have an institution that runs more like a mom and pop shop and less like a modern organization that puts good teams together and expects results, you’re going to get that.

Everything is fair game moving forward. Every decision that we make needs to be made with all of the relevant people sitting at the table. We don’t need surprises. We need the best results. We can’t afford to fire blanks or waste money. My leadership style is that you put groups in a room and you ask them to work through it. And when there isn’t enough talent in the room to do it, you identify your best players and you bring them forward. And then with guidance about how we’re going to get positive results instead of disagree, you push to get answers. Using this approach, the team approach, really matters to me. We’re all smarter together than we are individually, and I believe you will see more and more of this kind of thinking, which will empower you and will make sure that we get better solutions. I’m optimistic. I see the Cabinet working together as a very effective team. The deans are now in the loop. There’s always different agendas in the world, but we need all of the academic support areas to be similarly
engaged in decision-making at the appropriate level. Hopefully a collaborative approach will become part of campus culture and silos will start to melt.