1) I live in Denton and drive to work every day. Is there any way to get the roads fixed?

President Smatresk said I-35 is due to be completed in approximately 14 months, but at the crunch time. The university chose the latest date possible for TXDOT to close the North Texas Boulevard bridge for 10 weeks because of impacts to campus traffic and events during finals and commencement. He encouraged people to use alternate routes. We’ll be watching the situation and trying to help you negotiate it, he said. The good news is that the bridge closure impact will be over by August and shouldn’t disrupt the fall semester, he said. Once the bridge is reopened in August, things ought to start getting better and better faster.

2) Have we really thought through the 25-hour rule for student employees? We are forcing UNT’s best and brightest off campus for employment.

Elizabeth With, vice president for student affairs, said the 25-hour/week work rule was out of necessity and clarified that it only applied to the long semesters. The Affordable Care Act stipulates that if people work more than 30 hours per week, organizations like UNT are required to give them health insurance. UNT does not have the financial ability to provide insurance to all of our student employees and a vast majority of them of covered by their parents’ insurance already so there wasn’t necessarily a need, she said. The best way to ensure that student employees don’t work more than 30 hours a week is to limit their hours during the long semesters. During the breaks and over the summer, students can still work 40 hours. [Editor’s Note: The previous work week rule for students was 29 hours per week so the new rule only reduces it by four hours. There will be closer monitoring to ensure that students aren’t in violation of the new limit.]

President Smatresk added that the university took other things into consideration. It’s not in the best interest of the student to be working 40 hours per week and going to school, although there are certainly students who handle that on a routine basis, he said. But we’re here as an educational institution and we want our students to have enough time to be successful with their studies, he said. The other part of that argument, and I think we solved it, is that sometimes a student would work in more than one department and it was hard to keep track of hours, he said. We need to be acutely aware if a student has another job on campus and their combined hours would mean we must pay their health insurance, he said. That will create a pretty serious financial burden for the institution.

3) The area that used to be Stovall Hall has been landscaped and is beautiful. As one walks or rides down Highland you pass a nice library, then the mall area with the pool and fountain, then the beautifully landscaped area where Stovall was, the lovely business building, and then Matthews Hall. The south entrance to Matthews is horrible. There’s one pitiful rose bush
surrounded by tall ground cover and weeds. If you were to walk into that south entrance, you would see a broken electric outlet, duct tape holding broken marble together, and a pane of broken glass on the inner door, yet our building reps placed work order requests months ago. We work here and would like to see our building grounds look nice, too.

President Smatresk said he is sure that UNT Facilities will get to the work order, but may be backed up with the construction projects on campus. ‘I’m sure you’ve noticed, the grounds are getting better almost every week. We have not just been trimming trees and mowing lawns but we’ve been putting in new features and cleaning areas that were a little rough, he said. In the past two years since Bob [Brown, vice president for finance and administration] and Dave [Reynolds, associate vice president of facilities], have been on it, I think we have a lot to celebrate about how pretty our campus is and how well taken care of it is, he said. Rest assured, we want to have the most beautiful campus in this region.

4) What’s being done to the Science Research building and when will the work conclude?

President Smatresk said the university is renovating the research building because we need more space for new principal investigators being hired and the faculty members who are bringing in big grants. The project is scheduled for substantial completion January 2017. That building will get a new shell and the inside will be updated so that it is serviceable and compliant for the research taking place there. The university is in such dire need of research space, we decided to renovate instead, he said.

5) What is the status of the position classification study and when will we hear the results? Are the upper limits of the pay grades being adjusted up? I’m tired of never being able to keep my merit money. I’ve been shorted a lot over the years because my base salary doesn’t change. I got to the upper limit because my bosses apparently felt that I was an excellent employee and awarded me excellent merit raises. Now I feel like I’m being penalized because I’ve been so good. It makes me want to be just a mediocre employee because it sure doesn’t pay to be an excellent employee.

President Smatresk said that the university tries to provide raises that are commensurate with someone’s abilities and job description. As we work through a job grading exercise, one of the things that we have to understand that there is a range of values that every job is worth. While someone can be an extraordinary employee, if we can get that job done in that band of salary that corresponds to either national or regional standards, then it’s incumbent on the university to find an employee who can be within that band. If someone is a great employee, then I hope there is an upward path for them through promotion, he said. But what we can’t arbitrarily assign four different people doing the same job wildly divergent salaries. It creates serious equity challenges, he said. If someone has topped out at a pay range, that raises an issue about what the market and job position can bear. He suggested that an alternative is for that person to think about what further positions they can achieve that are in higher bands and more worthy of their talents.

6) There are several questions relating to the new accounting system, so to summarize all the points into one: I understand that UNT needed a new accounting system, however, those of us
in the trenches need help in interpreting the information we are trying to look at. Probably about 99.5% of those of us who deal with these funds in our areas are not CPAs or trained accountants. When I’m asked what the status of our funds are, I can only respond, “as of February 28, we had X amount of dollars.” But at this point, I don’t really know what we have because I can’t interpret the reports. Would it be possible for budget officers to attend the deans’ council? Sometimes we’re the last to know or don’t get all of the information.

President Smatresk said if the deans aren’t passing along all of the information, it’s probably something the person needs to take up with their dean. We don’t get down into the deep weeds on things like budget presentations with the deans. We talk more holistically about what their budget will be, lines that will be assigned and the conditions, he said.

We’ve been working on next fall’s budget. November is when we get the reconciliation of last year’s budget squared away, he said. Because of that and changing the software, the university has been cautious about allocating or finalizing the budget for next year and making decisions that allow deans to move forward for two reasons:

- Because we’re in the midst of this transition and we want to make sure we know where we stand, what our balances will be at the end of the year
- And because our budget isn’t formally approved until the August UNT System Board of Regents meeting.

We’re going have a good first draft budget soon that will give deans a 90 percent solution with a bit of variance around the edges depending on how enrollment figures hit next year and depending on a variety of small contingency funds, he said.

I think it’s fair to say that the new [system] install didn’t go quite as smoothly as we would have hoped. When you take the data from the old system and you try to crosswalk it to the new system, there are scripts that are written that convert from the old one to the new one. Those weren’t perfect. We’re in a process now where we are taking the old information and reconciling each budget so that people aren’t flying blindly, he said. It’s going to take a while. I’m sorry for that, he said. And that’s going to cause pain because the people with grants don’t know how much they’ve got in balances and departments don’t know how to reconcile their final budgets. We’re running through the period where normally we would be beginning the process of moving into the next fiscal year and closing out everything. I’m sure there will be forthcoming instructions for how to deal with it with whatever dates and expectations we have about completion, he said.

What we need is some clear communication with the campus and with budget officers so that they know what to expect, he said. Smatresk suggested that the Division of Finance and Administration hold a town hall for budget managers of their units along with the folks who are helping us to address these questions. I’ve never known a big software install to go perfectly smooth and I guess this one is no exception, he said.

7) What is your version of what is the meaning of life?

President Smatresk said it’s about finding something that satisfies you, supports your family and gives you a sense of purpose. And if we don’t do that here at the university, I don’t know where
we do it. I know more people who love what they do within this environment than any place I’ve ever been. I doubt there’s a lot of places where you can derive more internal gratification and satisfaction because we know just how many lives we change and we know just how much good we’re doing, he said. And we can measure it every year in the smiling faces of the moms, dads, nieces, nephews, grandmas and grandpas of our graduates.