The following remarks from Barry Hirsch follow those from Julie Hotchkiss, ACRDC Executive Director.

Thank you Julie. Before introducing Census Director Robert Groves, I want to review the history of how the ACRDC came about. Some of you know this story. Many of you do not.

The seed for the ACRDC began in the late 1990s. David Audretsch, then in the economics department, and my current colleague Paula Stephan, then the Andrew Young School associate dean, had the audacity to propose a standalone RDC to be located at Georgia State. That proposal received a positive review but was not awarded by NSF. Now jump ahead 10 years to August 2008. The CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] was concerned about the rising costs of its National Immunization Survey and wanted to consider using as its sampling frame the Census’ American Community Survey. To do this, the CDC had to have access to non-public versions of the ACS, and they wanted that access to be in Atlanta. To do this, they needed a Census RDC and that required a University PI and sponsorship. The folks at Census remembered GSU’s 1990s proposal and contacted Paula Stephan, who roped me into participating in a conference call with representatives from Census and the CDC. From that beginning, the conversation about an Atlanta RDC had begun.

In thinking about a possible RDC following that conversation, we decided at the outset that if we were to do this, it should involve a large number of institutions, rather than relying on the financial support and researchers from any one institution. The target universities we identified were the obvious ones, Georgia Tech and Emory in Atlanta, and UGA in nearby Athens. And we wanted the RDC lab to be located in a setting that would be accessible to area researchers, have strong security, and provide a good work environment.

Two important things then happened. Had they not both occurred, our efforts would not have continued. The first occurred in the Andrew Young School at GSU. We met with then Acting Dean Robert Moore. Bob immediately recognized the importance and significance of a Census RDC for GSU and for the southeast research community. We had a rough idea of how much money the RDC would require if we could form a six-member consortium. On the spot, Bob pledged that AYS would provide that support for the first three years. With GSU on board that enabled us to initially ignore [higher levels of administration at] GSU and direct our efforts at
getting the other institutions on board. (I should add that once the consortium was assembled and we let GSU know what we were planning, GSU administrators, without exception, were enthusiastic and supportive.) At each institution, one had to explain to faculty and administrators what an RDC is all about (no easy thing to explain), gather support, and then find the administrator who could and would commit to paying for it.

The second thing that happened, and at least as important, is that we turned to Julie Hotchkiss, a former faculty member at GSU and now a senior researcher at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. Julie immediately understood the importance of the RDC, agreed that location of the RDC at the Fed would be ideal, and saw that an RDC at the Fed would evolve into an important resource and opportunity for the Fed as well as for university researchers. Not only did the Fed agree to finance the RDC build-out and then house the RDC at a nominal cost, they were willing to allow Julie to dedicate half her time to the RDC. Had the AYS not pledged its support early and unconditionally and had not the Fed made their space available and encouraged Julie to be executive director, the ACRDC proposal and subsequent efforts would not have gotten off the ground. Having Julie as executive director has been essential for getting the ACRDC up and running and it will be her continued leadership that makes its long-run success a reality.

Following those two early events, many things then had to fall in place. Let me go over just a few, naming a few names, many of whom are in the room, but by no means close to everyone that deserves recognition.

At Georgia State, I was having lunch with Bill Usery, former Secretary of the US Department of Labor and in whose name I am honored to have a chair. I mentioned the Census RDC to Bill in passing. Without being asked, Bill generously pledged money to help fund the Andrew Young School’s share.

At the CDC, Jim Singleton, assessment chief in the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), was a co-PI on our NSF proposal and he shepherded the needed financial support and approval at the CDC.

At UGA, we contacted folks we knew in Economics (Chris Cornwell in particular), who pulled together key people from across campus, Warren Brown and Jeff Dorfman in particular. They carefully prepared a presentation for David Lee, their VP for Research, explaining what an RDC was and how it would benefit research and external funding. They then asked for central
university funding. David immediately recognized the RDC as a “no-brainer” and provided funding. UGA was now on board.

At Emory, we found researchers throughout the university interested in the RDC, but none could quite identify a unit that would take the lead on funding or the key person to make this happen. The breakthrough came when my colleague Paula Stephan told us that of that we must talk to Claire Sterk, the senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, who was a close friend of Paula’s and who she sees at her gym. Once Emory faculty spoke with Claire, she understood immediately the upside potential of the RDC and Emory was on board with central funding.

At Georgia Tech, there were numerous faculty in a diverse set of departments who had an interest in the RDC. The trio of Jerry Thursby in the COM, Diana Hicks in public policy, and Patrick McCarthy in Economics, were able to show administrators the strong support for the RDC in their units, and were able to get central funding from their research office.

So that was our original consortium. GSU, the Fed, the CDC, Emory, Georgia Tech, and UGA. In the process of preparing our proposal to Census/NSF, we collected 73 faculty mini-research proposals using the RDC, primarily from researchers at the consortium institutions, but also from other nearby universities. (I spent much of summer 2009 reducing these 73 proposals to about six lines each.) One of the persons contacted was health economist Mike Morrisey at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Mike not only agreed to write a proposal, but asked what it would take to join the consortium. We told him and instantly UAB pledged support. We then had to go back to the other institutions and convince them that less money was now needed.

While we gathered support for the RDC and began work on the NSF proposal, we received substantial and invaluable assistance from the wonderful people at Census, Lynn Riggs, Ron Jarmin, Lucia Foster, and Mark Mildorf, in particular. Ron, Lucia, and Lynn, along with Brian Holly, flew to Atlanta in May 2009, presenting RDC “dog and pony” shows at the Fed, GSU, and UGA. These both fueled local interest in the RDC, and at the same time showed Census the strength of support for the RDC in Atlanta and Athens. Since that time, the continuing support, professionalism, and dedication of the Census team have been an inspiration.

Our proposal was submitted to NSF in August 2009, was reviewed by two panels, Economics and MMS (Methodology, Measurement and Statistics), each of which placed it in the highest recommended category for support. Following the positive recommendation for the award, the official announcement of the award was delayed until September 2010 in order for the
NSF and Census to agree to a new set of MoUs regarding Census RDCs (this applied to the RDCs generally and was not specific to Atlanta).

Once this occurred and the RDC was officially awarded, the next step was putting together legal documents that created a consortium agreement among the seven institutions and Census, a joint project agreement between GSU as PI and Census, and a lease agreement between GSU and the Fed. From the beginning of our discussions about the RDC, what I had feared most was that we would be awarded the RDC and that I would then spend the rest of my career dealing with legal documents about which I had little understanding. Manna from heaven then arrived in the form of Caroline Lombard of the legal office at GSU, who was assigned the task of handling the ACRDC agreements. Starting with some guidance based on legal agreements used for the Chicago RDC, Caroline worked initially with Julie and me, and subsequently dealt with the legal staffs at Census and each of the other six consortium institutions. Were it not for Caroline’s competence and calm demeanor, I doubt that Julie and I could have retained our sanity. For this we are grateful.

Finally there was the physical build-out of the Center. With a lot of hard work by Julie and others at the Fed, coupled with assistance from Census, a wonderful work space for RDC researchers was designed and created. Many of you saw the Center this morning. And for most of us, it will be the last time we are allowed inside the lab.

Finally, no one is more important to a Census RDC than its administrator; the Census employee who handles operations, oversees research data and projects, and is the only person allowed in the RDC lab apart from researchers who have receive time-limited approval to work in the lab and access project-specific data. We have been fortunate to hire as our Atlanta Census administrator Dr. Melissa Banzhaf, a PhD economist from UNC-Chapel Hill who worked previously at the BLS.

Again, on behalf of Julie and me, we want to sincerely thank everyone in this room and the many others who have helped make the Atlanta Census RDC a reality. Now the most rewarding work – the research – can begin.