STATE OF THE COLLEGE ADDRESS  
September 23, 2009

INTRODUCTION

This is my fifth fall state of the college address. They get harder to do and I think I know the reason why. When I was in my first year of law school, whose compulsory subjects included the law of Real Property, my professor gave us a cue for remembering that an estate in fee simple could never follow on an estate in fee simple in the same piece of property. “Remember,” he said “you can never follow a banjo act with a banjo act.” It is a challenge to find fresh ways of addressing recurring issues and I am grateful for your attendance.

The Year 2008-2009

The academic year just concluded was difficult and stressful for everyone. Economic woes were paramount but their exacerbation of social anxiety was even more acutely evident than the reduction in value of real estate or stock portfolios or college endowments. People were, and are, apprehensive or even frightened and this makes them irritable and angry in ways they can’t even always define. One need only witness the vitriolic exchanges at a town hall meeting over national health care to realize that something is awry.

For the most part, we as college members don’t behave that way. Our discussions tend to be governed by implicit rules of civility and fairness even when we are discharging our obligation to criticize. In a sense, we are society’s loyal opposition. I will give three examples: our Convocation last Wednesday featured Jeffrey Zaslow, bestselling co-author of The Last Lecture. The following day, a faculty member raised with a number of colleagues whether this highly popular work was rightly made the summer reading for our students, worthy of academic credit. It is an important question, worthy of discussion and can’t be answered simply by pointing to the book’s sales figures. It is the sort of debate, initiated collegially, that we should regularly have at Ramapo.

The second example: The Liberal Arts and Professional Studies Group, made up of nine faculty and one staff member, recently produced a working document memorializing the discussions that took place at their meetings last year. It raises critical questions that are sometimes pointed but in the best spirit of collegiality. I was particularly taken with the point that in the context of the fundamental question, “What is higher education really for?, the apparent rivalry between liberal and professional education… is ill-conceived and unnecessary.”
And my third example: the assessment of me by the faculty this past spring. There were 83 anonymous questionnaire responses and, of these, 34 included written comments. Again, I am impressed by the thoughtfulness of the comments and the efforts, with very few but notable exceptions, to be constructively critical.

The College has been through a lot; indeed, since 2000 it has been through five presidents and six vice-presidents for academic affairs. Forty-nine senior faculty members have retired since 2000 and five net new faculty lines have been added each year since 2003. Our physical facilities have greatly expanded and we have had to manage all this in a climate of funding austerity and overweening external monitoring. Add the introduction of the Curriculum Enhancement Plan in 2006 and the transition to integrated planning and budgeting, the further integration of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs and we are a remarkable success story. We even had our bond rating outlook changed from ‘negative’ to ‘stable’ by both Moody’s and Standard and Poor’s.

What are the indicators of that success: We have over two dozen new faculty from remarkably diverse backgrounds and all persons of extraordinary accomplishment. We have more freshmen students than we had originally planned for because fewer decided to withdraw over the summer. The academic quality of these students is slightly increased and our revitalized Honors Program is attracting a lot of interest. We have not had to lay off staff. We have a supportive board of trustees and Foundation board of governors. In that regard, let me pay special tribute to the Rev. Dr. Vernon Walton’s service as Chair of the Board of Trustees these past two years. His support and wisdom have been of inestimable benefit to me and I look forward to continuing to work with him and with our new Chair, our own alumnus, A.J. Sabath.

I also wish to single out for special thanks the Foundation Investment Committee headed by Thomas Srednicki. Through their tireless efforts and attention, our investments have fared much better than those of most other colleges and universities.

Yet we must ask: what has been the price of our success? Let me identify three cost factors:

1. The increase in tension between liberal and professional programs.

   The sumptuousness of the Anisfield building and the prominence of professional program accreditation has led to the “What are we chopped liver?” lament which I find understandable and which I share. When it comes to capital needs in particular, government remains unresponsive although we are looking at ways to take advantage of the new public/private partnership legislation. And fundraising is still a considerably
greater challenge than it was but we will persevere and we will bring additional resources to the other schools.

2. A general discomfiture over the pace and scope of change reflected in calls for increased transparency and accountability.

I understand this issue as well and I appreciate that we are all grappling with it in our particular spheres. The Provost and I have met with faculty over the summer to discuss how we can do a better job. Two factors increase the problem. First is that much of the change is not generated internally but simply foisted upon us. The second is that transparency often isn’t appropriate in light of all the facts and considerations and we may have to settle for translucency.

3. An even more general feeling, subsuming the other factors and felt more acutely at some times than others, of disconnectedness one from another and from the institutional College. Who are my colleagues; especially the newer ones? Who will go to bat for me? What does the College stand for and where is it going?

It is natural at such times to look back, especially in this our 40th anniversary. And we have much to learn from the past, including that we are not alone. Even institutions that have reached a great age have grappled with the forces of change. Consider the case of Cambridge University, founded in 1209 and so celebrating its 800th anniversary this year. Its first endowed professorship, created in 1502, was the Lady Margaret Professorship in Divinity. Five hundred years and many endowments later, in 2002, was created the curiously named Prince Philip Professorship of Technology.

What measures can we take to redress these concerns. I propose three in the short term. The first two focus on the faculty. I hope soon to announce the location for a faculty dining room – a separate and quiet place where faculty can mingle over lunch or coffee. I am also making arrangements to hold six dinners at my home over the course of the year involving a mix of junior and senior faculty from different schools. At each dinner, I will be asking one junior faculty member and one senior to speak for ten minutes on some aspect of their current research or academic work.

Finally, we are working on a plan to capture the stories that many have about Ramapo College as part of our 40th anniversary commemoration. It is important that these not be lost.
I said it was important to look to the past but we must not fix our gaze there. My own preferred orientation is the one espoused by Francis Bacon in 1604, with which I will close:

“For myself, I found that I was fitted for nothing so well as for the study of truth; as having a Mind nimble and versatile enough to catch the Resemblances of Things (which is the chief point) and at the same time steady enough to fix and distinguish their Subtler Differences; as being gifted by Nature with Desire to seek, patience to Doubt, fondness to Meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to consider, carefulness to dispose and set in order; and as being [one] that neither affects what is new nor admires what is old, and that hates every kind of Imposture. So I thought my Nature had a kind of familiarity and Relationship with Truth.”

- Francis Bacon, *Of the Interpretation of Nature* 1604