I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. On September 14, 2005, almost three full years ago, I gave my first state of the college address. Being unfamiliar with the tradition, I had to ask what was expected of me. The answer, fortunately, was “mercifully little” as I had then been President for only 75 days. I believe the expectations are higher now; indeed they should be.

One of the annoyances of contemporary discourse is the frequent tendency to describe as a “community” any group of persons, regardless of their location or type of interaction, who happen to share virtually any characteristic. So, for example, I imagine the “mooseburger-eating community” is already somewhere acknowledged in print, although perhaps not the “mooseburger-eating community organizer”.

This is partly why I bristle at references to the “Ramapo College Community”. A college such as ours – a real college – is a community – a real community. Derived from the Latin collegium (meaning society) it means “a body of fellow members engaged in a common pursuit under a common set of rules”. You and I, the administration, faculty, staff and students are not members of the Ramapo College Community; that is redundant; we are simply members of Ramapo College. We are colleagues.

Why do I harp on this point? Because as members of a college - as colleagues - we are engaged in a common pursuit – the pursuit of knowledge
and, as a public college, in its broad dissemination. And we recognize that this means we have obligations to one another. This recognition was at the core of the exercise that 96 of you participated in last spring when in small groups you met to discuss ways in which we might improve the services we provide internally, in support of one another, and externally. Some, I know, took this exercise negatively, even personally, because they saw underlying it a tone of criticism. These are tough times; we are asked to do a lot and sometimes the askers are of undernourished sensibility, unaware and perhaps even uncaring about the challenges we face. Criticism, if it is personal, is corrosive.

I urge you though, not to take personally the sort of criticism that is essential to our success as a liberal arts college. We must critically evaluate, assess and measure our performance as colleagues engaged in a common pursuit. Critical thinking and evaluating are what we do.

So let me go back to that first state-of-the-college address where I identified three challenges to be faced. The first was the implementation of the new undergraduate Curriculum Enhancement Plan; the second was to enhance diversity; and the third was to refresh the strategic plan while explicitly tying planning to budgeting. Let me briefly, critically, reflect on each of those.

CEP was a bold initiative with lofty objectives. Those were:

(i) to produce more consistently rigorous courses of instruction in General Education and the major disciplines;
(ii) to reinforce the four pillars of our mission: internationalism, interdisciplinarity, interculturalism and experiential education;

(iii) to foster a teaching and learning environment appropriate for a first-rate residential liberal arts college;

(iv) to strengthen the ties between our liberal arts and professional programs; and

(v) to continue attracting outstanding faculty, staff and students.

We are definitely making headway. We have had task forces review and reaffirm the significance of our four pillars, we have reinforced the liberal arts foundation and linkages across programs, and we are indeed attracting outstanding faculty, staff and students. But there are signs that we have some distance yet to travel. I will mention two in particular.

According to our 2008 NSSE survey, which had a 45% response rate representing 988 students – 565 from first year and 423 seniors – more than half our respondents reported spending 10 hours or less per week preparing for class. In other words, a majority of our students are spending on average less than 90 minutes a day outside class studying, reading, writing, doing homework, engaged in lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing or involved in other academic activities. There is a gap between this reality and our aspiration to be the premier public college in the New York/New Jersey area. I believe this gap should concern us. A rigorous curriculum is wasted if the response to it is half disengaged. We, faculty and administration, must critically assess why this is so even though the reasons may be disquieting.
Secondly, the entering SAT scores for regular admits have fallen from 1179 in 2005 to 1153 this year. In 2005 our regular admit students averaged in the top 17% of their high school graduating classes whereas this year they average in the top 22%. And this despite an overall increase in the total number of applications. I want to see us reverse this trend and we will do so under the aegis of the strategic enrollment management plan that so many of you have worked on.

The second challenge that I identified in 2005 – the enhancement of diversity – is slowly being met. For example, our freshman minority enrolment this year is 23.4% as opposed to 22.3% in 2005. However, diversity in a public college must also include, in addition to race and ethnicity, age, gender, religion, physical or mental abilities and disabilities, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin and diversity of experiences and political philosophies. And again, in a college, this diversity cannot result in experiences that are fragmentary and isolationist or how can we be said to be colleagues engaged in a common pursuit? We might as well disband, go to our separate corners and sign up with a McUniversity whose commitment to diversity extends to taking tuition fees from any and every one in exchange for a credential.

And the third challenge I identified in 2005 was the refreshment of the strategic plan and the explicit tying of planning to budgeting. The Strategic Plan was approved by the Board of Trustees last December and all units are now completing their planning submissions and relating them to the three goals of the Strategic Plan:
1. Enhancing academic excellence

2. Investing in the future

3. Enriching college life and community presence

Why the near fetishistic commitment to planning? Two reasons: first, if done collegially it increases involvement and commitment and, second, because longer term planning is the best means of potentially mediating fiscal and social volatility over time. We have become so accustomed to that volatility that we do not take stock of how, in even three years, we have had to cut millions of dollars in expenditures and increase tuition and auxiliary revenues just to balance our budget. That we have been able to do so while at the same time pursuing such strategic priorities as a net increase in full-time faculty is a tribute to the focused dedication of the administration, faculty and staff and the Board of Trustees and the Foundation Board.

We need to maintain a broad planning horizon. State revenues, which in this fiscal year will provide about 27% of our operating budget, are falling. How will we make up the continuing annual deficits that experience dictates we should anticipate?

Over the next five years, the number of New Jersey high school graduates is projected to decrease by 4% and by an even greater percentage in most of the neighboring states. What are the implications of that for us especially when even that number is more volatile than first appears since the number
of white, non-Hispanic students as a sub-group is projected to decrease by 7% while the number of Hispanic graduates is projected to increase by 13%.

At a more mundane level, how do we plan for capital needs such as a new roof on the academic building? We can’t simply count on borrowing given our current debt load.

And how do we stay institutionally supple enough to accommodate unforeseen changes created by external forces. The NJ Stars program, for example, is the embodiment of well-meaning sloppiness of thought. Academically well-qualified students are under this program given financial incentives first to attend a two year college and then to round out their undergraduate education by transferring to a four year college. This is typically accomplished (since they often don’t qualify for financial aid) by having the four year colleges subsidize them beyond the relatively modest allotment provided by the state.

Nor is the adverse financial effect the only one, as the pool of first time freshmen applicants is concurrently reduced as the number of transfer applicants increases. Furthermore, these transfer applicants want housing, a demand we have been able to satisfy by installing over 60 transfer students for this semester in the Suffern Holiday Inn.

My appraisal of these circumstances leads to several conclusions: First, the field of higher education is increasingly competitive and we must place a priority on continuing to build our academic reputation and the strength of our academic programs. We want academically well-qualified students to find additional reasons to choose Ramapo, hence our renewed
focus on the Honors program under Professor Marta Vides. Our academically best-qualified students are increasingly interested in enhanced programs and I personally would like us to consider actively working towards the establishment of an honors college.

I can’t emphasize enough how important our faculty and staff are in this regard. The best student prospects want to hear from faculty what Ramapo has to offer. They want sound academic advice from faculty and staff and we will offer advisement training. This is another area where our graduate student survey and 2008 NSSE survey are telling. Only 23% of our freshman students last year relied on their official academic advisor as the primary source of academic advice. In strengthening our academic reputation, we need pay particular attention to academic advising.

Second, we must redouble our efforts to strengthen diversity starting with expanded recruitment. This is already underway concurrently with a thorough review of our scholarship program to ensure that we maximize the return on that investment.

Third, we must realize that the status quo is changing in many respects. The continued expansion of our traditional undergraduate population is unlikely for the reasons I have identified. The demand for graduate programs on the other hand, is increasing and we must continue to move ahead on that front. In ten days, the Provost and I will meet with officials at the Commission for Higher Education to pave the way for presentation of our graduate program proposals.
At the end of May, I held a three day retreat with senior members of cabinet. Among the issues we discussed was the configuration of Student Affairs given the planned retirements of Vice President Pam Bischoff on June 1st of next year and the scheduled retirement of Dean of Students Nancy Mackin only two months later. This is institutionally a one-two punch. We could not hope to find external candidates who would make up the deficit in experience and competence that Pam and Nancy’s departure will create. We therefore had to look at this challenge creatively and two organizing principles emerged. One was that we needed to continue managing Student Affairs under the leadership of two senior positions and the second was that we needed to reinforce the relationship between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

Given that June 1st is only a few months away, we also had to make some decisions quickly and let the College know what we were planning. Accordingly, I want to announce that, as of June 1, 2009, Student Affairs will be led and administered by two Associate Vice-Presidents, Miki Cammarata, currently Associate Dean of Students, and Patrick Chang, currently Vice-Provost for Budget and Personnel. They will report to the Provost.

I am personally grateful to Miki and Pat for their positive and enthusiastic response to this restructuring proposal. They have the skills and experience we need to fill the gap that will be created by Pam and Nancy’s retirement and they will preserve the continuity of operations in student services. Miki will be responsible for Athletics, Student Development, Health and Counseling and Judicial Affairs. Pat will have primary responsibility for
Residence Life, the Cahill Center, the Spiritual Center and Campus Ministries and Specialized Services.

One obvious issue to be dealt with is how to cover the responsibilities that Miki and Pat now hold once they move to these new positions and we will make sure that is determined in good time so that there is no gap.

Most of the other changes that I want to announce today are related. Responsibility for Public Safety, Dining Services and Campus Store will also shift on June 1st from Student Affairs to Finance and Administration. These changes will rationalize the workload among divisions and enable us to gain some operational efficiencies.

At the same time, responsibility for events and conferences will move from Academic Affairs to Marketing and Communications in the division of Institutional Advancement. This recognizes that increasingly our events and conference activities are opportunities to advance the image and reputation of the College. I emphasize that details are being worked out but wanted to tell everyone in good time that we will continue to look at other operational efficiencies (eg reduction in number of vehicles). I am also pleased to announce that our first Constituent Assembly meeting will be held in early October and another meeting in early November.