State of the College Address
by
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Introduction

Thank you all for being here this afternoon. It is gratifying to see so many faculty, staff and students willing to overlook the sheer presumptuousness of anyone purporting to give a state of the college address who has been resident for only 75 days. However, there is virtue in having me speak to you from my vantage point in that, whenever I refer to the College’s many accomplishments, I cannot fairly intimate that I deserve any credit for them. Accordingly, you have every right to expect that this address will avoid the windy air of self-congratulation that sometimes characterizes exercises of this sort.

However, there is also a potential disadvantage: my perceptions of our challenges, and therefore of our proper priorities, are not fully developed and may in some cases be flat out wrong. I therefore hope that my observations will be seen as preliminary and leavened by a due degree of humility.

I also want to observe that any perspective on the state of our College must be tempered by appreciation of the events unfolding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the profound devastation that has been wrought on so many of our sister institutions. We weigh and measure our challenges as we must, in our own context, but with a stark realization of our own relatively good fortune and of the need to reach out to those whose fortunes have been dashed.

Our People

I am often asked whether Jackie and I are “settled in”. The type of settling to which the question is directed goes beyond unpacking boxes and arranging furniture; it most importantly refers to the psychology of adapting to a new environment and that is a function not of things but of people. Ramapo College has been for Jackie and me a very welcoming community and at this early stage that is my most powerful impression. It is one that I hope all can experience who join this community and it will be important to me as President to help foster the conditions which enhance that prospect.
We do indeed have outstanding people beginning with our student body who are better qualified and, I believe, better prepared than ever; I will say more about them later but want to pay tribute to all those in admissions and to Vice-President Bischoff and her staff who do such an able job of supporting our students once they arrive. We have an extraordinarily dedicated and loyal staff, committed to furthering the College’s academic mission. Their efforts are vital to shaping our relatively new identity as a residential college. Our faculty, whether founders or recent appointees, are passionate that the College remain true to its founding principles while translating them effectively to meet the challenges of 2005 and beyond. They are focused on ensuring that the College reach its full potential. We have a Board of Trustees who are dedicated to the flourishing of the College and its programs as they grow in the knowledge and appreciation of them. We have a tireless Foundation Board whose many activities are all directed to supporting the strategic objectives of the College. And we have a growing body of alumni occupying positions of prominence in society and ready and willing to support their College. These are not statements of sentimental aspiration but a true measure of what I see and have experienced here.

The first year class: my fellow frosh

Our 749 freshman come not only from the United States but from Bulgaria, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Serbia Montenegro, Spain and Trinidad and Tobago. In addition to New Jersey, we have students from Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York and Virginia.

The entering SAT scores for regular admits (which are 603 of the 749 freshmen) are on average a combined 1179 – averaging 582 on the verbal score and 597 on mathematics. This surpasses last year’s average of 1164 and is the highest in the College’s history. Furthermore, the regular admit students averaged in the top 17% of their high school graduating classes compared with 19% last year.

It is also particularly significant, in light of our mission, that minority enrolment in the entering class is up from 20.1% in 2004 to 22.3% in 2005. Black student enrolment for example, has gone from 48 students or 6.4% of the class in 2004 to 68 students or 9.1% of the class this year.

Overall, full-time enrolment is at an all-time high. 81.1% of our students are now full-time as compared with 78.6% in 2004. Retention is also at an all-time high. Year to year retention rates at every level have increased with the most significant being 3rd to 4th year retention which has gone from 71% last year to 74.8% this year.

External Rankings

There are also external indicia that can be fed in to our evaluation of the State of the College and how that is perceived. For the second successive year, U.S. News and World Reports College rankings place Ramapo first among comprehensive public colleges in
the north. Princeton Review’s publication, *The Best Northeastern Colleges – 224 Select Schools to Consider*, not only lists Ramapo but assigns us an admissions selectivity ranking of 80th among those 224 schools, which in turn were selected from more than 1000 schools in the north. More importantly, the Princeton Review also evaluated the quality of life for students on campus. The individual measures included overall student happiness; the beauty, safety and location of the campus; comfort of dormitories; food quality and ease in dealing with the administration. Here we are number 61.

These external rankings are reassuring and generate excellent and welcome publicity. However, they are not fundamentally important. Instead, the fundamentally important measures of our success should be those we establish for ourselves collectively and rigorously. I will return to those in a moment.

Most of the evidence that I have of the way the College is perceived externally has been gathered informally. We do have some formal measures: for example we know from some polling we have commissioned that New Jersey residents are becoming more aware of Ramapo College and increasingly think of it as a destination for their children. I hear this myself in the surrounding community not only from parents and prospective students but from community leaders. I believe it is important for us to be responsive to and appreciated by our local community if we are to enhance our reputation statewide and even nationally. I therefore have been attending community events as the College President and seeking out opportunities to speak about Ramapo College to anyone who will listen. Happily, there is a ready audience whether it is the Mahwah Chamber of Commerce or the Bergen Highlands Rotary Club.

There is also, of course, another measure of external validation and that is in fund-raising success. With the support of Vice-President Cathy Davey and her colleagues in Institutional Advancement, I have been able to play a part in raising $550,000 since I arrived on July 1st. We have secured a new $100,000 bequest towards an endowed scholarship fund, a $100,000 grant to enhance our sustainability efforts and a $35,000 challenge grant in support of the new Spiritually Center about which I will be at liberty to provide more details by the end of next month.

**Challenges in the Year Ahead**

1. **Introducing the new undergraduate curriculum**

By the Fall of 2006, subject to Board of Trustee approval on the 28th of this month, under the leadership of Provost Sandy Pfeiffer, we expect to introduce a new undergraduate curriculum under the aegis of what used to be known as CLA, standing for Course Load Adjustment, but which at my urging is now to be known as CEP or the Curriculum Enhancement Plan, a designation which more fully captures its objectives. These are:

(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.

I will be asking that we establish performance measures to enable us to determine how successful we are in meeting our goals. And from the outset, we need acknowledge that there is a soft underbelly to this worthy initiative as there will certainly be challenges in making the transition. We will be paying special attention, for example, to those students who will be combining courses from both the old and new curricula. It is intended that the time for continuing students to be able to complete their graduation requirements be the same as under the former curriculum regime.

I am also counting on the goodwill of our faculty and staff to be patiently constructive in helping make the transition as smooth as possible. This will and must mean changes to the status quo. Again to use an example: release time will now be highly exceptional and to help ensure community satisfaction with the fairness of our new arrangements, I propose that all workload assignments be made public.

2. Continuing to Enhance Diversity as a Component of Academic Excellence

Diversity in our academic community is not embroidery on the fabric of academic excellence; it is and should be part of the very weave. I ask you to listen to the following quotation from an address delivered by the political philosopher Leo Strauss on June 6, 1959. Entitled “What is Liberal Education”, it was delivered at the Annual Graduation Exercise of the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults at the University of Chicago. This is how he concluded:

Liberal education ...is a training in the highest form of modesty, not to say of humility. It is at the same time a training in boldness: it demands from us the complete break with the noise, the rush, the thoughtlessness, the cheapness of the Vanity Fair of the intellectuals as well as of their enemies. It demands from us the boldness implied in the resolve to regard the accepted views as mere opinions, or to regard the average opinions as extreme opinions which are at least as likely to be wrong as the most strange or the least popular opinions. Liberal education is liberation from vulgarity. The Greeks had a beautiful word for “vulgarity”; they called it apeirokalia, lack of experience in things beautiful. Liberal education supplies us with experience in things beautiful

Almost fifty years later, our engagement in attempting to enhance diversity may equally be seen as an attempt to liberate ourselves from the vulgarity of destructive stereotyping while enlarging, if we are bold in the way Strauss urges, our potential experience of things beautiful. Diversity – intellectual, cultural, racial, ethnic – not only enriches our
College but, as we know from the Biological Sciences, also fosters strength and resilience.

The Diversity Action Committee under its Chair, Acting Vice Provost Pat Chang, is working with our consultant Sue Rankin and Associates to complete the drafting of a Campus Climate Survey. Many of you have participated in the focus groups that have contributed to the development of that draft document. The survey will be administered the week of October 24th and I urge you to participate fully. The survey results will remain anonymous and confidential and will go only to the consultant who will issue a final report early in the new year. What will happen to that report you ask? That I cannot say but those of you who have been in my office and have noticed that in fact it does not have a single shelf can intuit what will not happen to it.

3. Strategic Planning

Here I reiterate my promise made at the Faculty In-Service day less than two weeks ago. I do not propose to engage in a new strategic planning exercise. I do propose to refresh the existing strategic plan by identifying those goals which are reachable over the next five years, to 2010, and establishing benchmarks to measure our progress from year to year. I will also be presenting to my cabinet colleagues within the next ten days, a proposed plan to tie planning to budgeting.

This will not be a zero-based budgeting exercise where every unit must justify every expenditure afresh but it will involve selective allocation and reallocation according to our strategic goals. It will be a consultative process but unless some pharmacological changes are made to the College water supply, not everyone will be happy. That is understandable: my aim will be somewhat more modest and that is to achieve a process that is seen by reasonable people to be fair.

4. Niggling Items

Here I am referring not to inherently trivial items but to ones which are relatively narrow in scope. One is parking. I have been exhorted through various media and in tones ranging from the merely hortatory to the near histrionic to utterly revamp the parking system. Lacking the sort of orderly mind that is naturally inclined to feats of engineering or even architecture, I have in concert with my cabinet colleagues instead decided that a consultant is needed if we are to go some distance to remediating some of the problems. The new parking deck will help next year and in the meantime we can make some adjustments but to those for whom parking principles are akin to articles of religious belief (and you are in that respect of many different faiths), let me only plead that we should not allow the best, as we perceive it, to be the enemy of the good.

The other item is campus beautification and the immediate concern that many recently planted shrubs and bushes are dying because the drought has overcome our limited capacity to respond. We will respond by allocating enough funds to hire someone for a
period of months so that these needs can be met. In the longer term we will be addressing
campus beautification as part of our strategic plan.

I mention these items because they are perhaps narrow in scope but not inconsequential
and it is important for me to pay attention to these items even as I am prone to being
preoccupied by the bigger stuff.

5. The Bigger Stuff

(i) Bricks and clicks and spondulicks

“Spondulicks” is nineteenth century English slang for money. I was once told that there
are more slang words for money than for anything else apart from sex and drink and the
teller suggested that since money might be gainfully employed in pursuit of the other two
it should be accorded priority. In our enterprise founded on “bricks”, physical
infrastructure, and “clicks”, information technology, the pursuit of money must be
accorded priority. Our state support as a percentage of revenue has declined in each of the
last ten years from 52.4% in 1995 to 33.5% today. The public is only just becoming
aware of this and we will need the public’s help to ensure that we do not continue the
devolution that, according to the Economist magazine, one university president described
as going from being a “state institution” to being “state-supported” then “state-assisted”,
next “state-located” and finally just “state-annoyed”.

This is a big challenge: as a public institution we are constrained in what we can charge
as tuition and our need to build when the state provided virtually no direct capital funds
has required us to spend a higher percentage of our budget than we would like on debt
service. However we have not been imprudent – far from it. Vice-President Bruni and
her colleagues have been comprehensive in their planning and we have seen all the
hoped-for benefits of our capital expansion. These will continue to be felt as the new
dormitory comes on stream in a year and the new Science Education and Technology
building the year after that.

Obviously we would only consider taking on additional debt after very careful analysis
and, in the meantime, I must make fundraising a major part of my work as College
President. At the state level, I was in Trenton on Monday evening and again on Tuesday
morning meeting with my presidential colleagues in pursuit of a plan to convince the
state to float a bond issue in aid of capital expansion. That effort is concerted and when it
bears fruit, as I believe it will, Ramapo College will get its fair share.

It will be a singular and longer-term exercise, however, to convince state officials that
Ramapo College has not been receiving its fair share of annual appropriations.
Nevertheless, I will pursue it and doggedly. I trust the community will understand that
this will require regular attendance in Trenton and in Washington D.C. to ensure that we
are a presence there. In that regard I am particularly grateful for the support I have
received from Board Chair Tom Zelante and his fellow Trustees.
Indeed, one immediate fund-raising effort is focused on securing a significant federal appropriation for the Science, Education and Technology Center. I am also soliciting funds to support School of Business accreditation, seeking additional funding for the Spirituality Centre and the Sustainability Education Center and finalizing pending named gift opportunities in the Bradley Center. In addition to these capital initiatives, we have ambitious goals to secure new named endowments and we are focusing intensely on planned giving. I will be hosting meetings with alumni in various regions and the number of events planned for the Havemeyer House is already triple what it has been in past years. And by the way, several of those events are exclusively for College groups to meet with me informally – they are not all devoted to external efforts.

Again, there is an underside to this. Nothing is as persuasive to outside donor prospects as evidence that the faculty and staff themselves have contributed to the Annual Fund so I hope you will join with me in supporting the Annual Fund this year. And please let me know when faculty grant applications are successful as the effect is proven to be a definite loosening of the purse-strings of external donors.

(ii) School of Business Accreditation

The pursuit of AACSB accreditation by the School of Business is important not just because the School and its programs are important but because of the process of engagement that it will require of many if not most of us over the next several years. We will shortly be starting the process to select a new Dean of Business as well so there is much to be excited about.

With the excitement though will come some heavy lifting. The pursuit of accreditation will bring with it the need to address issues of resources and curriculum including the relationship between liberal and professional studies. Already Acting Dean Brian Lofman and his colleagues are working on these questions and I believe the School and the College will be the richer for it.

Conclusion

A few days ago my wife Jackie referred me to the current issue of the Economist which contains a survey of higher education entitled The Brains Business. I commend it to you both because it is predictably acute and well-written but also (and this much less predictable) it concludes unequivocally that, and I quote, “America’s system of higher education is the best in the world. That is because there is no system”. I will leave you with that teaser but in closing I want to refer to a quote contained in the piece. It is from a piece by Lord Noel Annen who was a noted legal academic and academic administrator in Great Britain. I might also add that he first studied Law but that might be pushing it just a bit. His credo was always that universities and colleges exist to cultivate the intellect. He argued:

A university is dead if the dons cannot in some way communicate to the
students the struggle- and the disappointments as well as the triumphs of that struggle – to produce out of the chaos of human experience some grain of order won by the intellect.

So soon after the gulf coast disaster, and following on the heels of the fourth anniversary of 9/11 it is good to remember why we are here and to recognize that Ramapo College is and must be committed to producing order out of seeming chaos. I wish us all every success in the year ahead.