STATE OF THE COLLEGE ADDRESS
September 14, 2011
Dr. Peter P. Mercer, President

INTRODUCTION
Welcome everyone. I am very pleased that you can join me this afternoon for what I think is my thirteenth State of the College Address.

I’m at the stage now where people come up to me usually around the Mahwah area and say “What a great college Ramapo is. You’re doing a splendid job.” And the only thing that keeps me right now from just sitting down and leaving with you that alone is that I suspect Colonel Qaddafi is being told the same thing even today. You can’t rely too much on those that are closest to you. To some extent, we have to look at data and our data is strong.

TRUE ASSETS: NEW & RETURNING STUDENTS, FACULTY & STAFF
I want to begin with our freshman class who are an impressive group, full of enthusiasm and vitality. Their SAT average score is 1169 making them the second most qualified academically, combine that with their academic standing from high school and I think even more important in light of what we have been trying to do for the last several years, the diversity of this class has increased from the average over the last several years of 22% to closer to 30%. And for along time we have pushed against the notion that those two goals were incompatible. They are not. We have improved diversity as well as academic standing.

I have also been interested to see the effect of the ban on freshman parking. It already seems to me that there are more people around on the weekends. We don’t have much evidence to go by yet but I hear that from students themselves and I see it myself when I do my drive arounds on the weekends. Our upperclassmen, equally vital, make this such a wonderful place to administer, teach at, and participate in, and I, for one, am very grateful for their return.

I am also continually impressed with our outstanding faculty. I had just a passing conversation with Professor Stephen Rice the other day in the cafeteria. We were talking about his work, along with Professor Meredith Davis, under the NEH grant the college received on Landmarks of American History and Culture. He was saying that one of the great advantages of working under that grant for the last several months has been that he’s had the opportunity to work with people on campus, particularly those helping with technical presentations, that he didn’t really know before. And he said to me, “We have some great people here.” And it is wonderful when you can have that realization afresh. At the reception for faculty to welcome them back, I had a senior professor say to me, “We have great young faculty. We have made wonderful hires.” I think that is true and I think we should celebrate it.

I also want to pay particular attention to the staff that were here during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene and who stayed for upwards of 48 hours or more without
much sleep and without much of a rest in order to make sure the college could continue functioning. When I say “the college” I think preeminently of my own home which managed to start leaking from the top at the same time the basement was filling from below. I hope that is not a metaphor for my own aging process later on.

I did once visit a man who was the dean of a law school. He passed away only three weeks ago. When I visited with him about four years ago he was already in an assisted living facility well into his eighties. And I asked, “How are you, Bob?” And he replied, “Peter, I am at that stage of life where what hasn’t dried up…leaks.” That is apropos of nothing in particular. My guess is though that if we were to do a survey in a couple of months, you’ll remember that and virtually nothing else of this address.

I also want to pay tribute to us all. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recognized Ramapo College as one of the *Great Colleges to Work For*. And they didn’t make that evaluation based on my trumped up evaluation. They made it based on the responses that the College at large provided to the questions that were asked of them. So I think it does reflect not only *The Chronicle’s* view of us, but our own view of ourselves, which is a good thing.

**PLANNING AND RESULTS**

One of the things that I have taken stock of in thinking about today’s address is the emphasis that we now place on planning. In a volatile environment, which this is, the amount of time that we spend on planning increases because there are so many contingencies that we have to potentially be ready for and consider. I know from many of you that that process seems rather rarified and distant, but I just want to go over some of the results of the planning that we have done.

Because of the way in which we are funded, we have had to become the source of our own salvation and take money back from the center in order to delegate it again under the aegis of SPIF (*Strategic Priority Incentive Fund*) and other programs for strategic purposes. I just want to read some of the outcomes supported by SPIF:

- AACSB Accreditation of the Anisfield School of Business
- Our Adult Learners Program
- Our Honors Program and Honors Convocation
- Technical Purchases such as Budget Modeling Software
- Our Business Continuity and Emergency Planning Exercise
- The Development of a Capital Fund (which is partly possible because of SPIF)
- The Center for Innovative and Professional Learning
- The Diversity Action Committee (which is an initiative that started under Sandy Pfeiffer)
- Faculty Travel Grants
- GECCO Summer Stipends
- Interdisciplinary Course Design
- International Recruitment
- Start-up Costs for Graduate Programming
Start-up Costs for Online Instruction
Supplements for Student-Faculty Research
And, a very important one: The Full Funding of the First Year Cost of Attendance for our EOF (Educational Opportunity Fund) Students

With respect to the EOF initiative, this is the first year probably in a couple that it won’t be entirely full funding but let me tell you what that funding has meant. Because we have attracted students of higher academic standing with those offers and because we have made it possible for them to attend college without having to work, we have attracted better students and they have performed better. The SAT score of our EOF students in two years has gone up about 90 points and their retention rate and graduation rate rivals that of the college as a whole. This is a great achievement and I am very proud of it.

All of these strategic initiatives you have made possible by your willingness to participate in an exercise which pares down your unit budgets and returns funds to the center to be redistributed. These are all wonderful accomplishments but I would be remiss if I didn’t talk about some warning signals that I also see on the horizon, there are at least three signals.

WARNING SIGNALS & THEIR IMPLICATIONS
The first warning signal is that the applications to the college haven’t really increased appreciatively in breadth. We are still essentially a state college. We haven’t attracted either the number of applications or the breadth of applications that we might have wished.

The second signal is that about 5% of our resident beds are empty this year. This is the first time we have seen elasticity in demand work the way it has. In the past few weeks alone, we have had a number of people call us and say, “Sorry, but we have to save money and we have to withdraw from housing.”

The third signal, which we just found out about yesterday, is that we lost one place in the U.S. News and World Report rankings. We are now fifth among the colleges in our ranking.

Now, what are the implications of these signals? As I mentioned, the 5% vacancy in residences illustrates elasticity and we are going to have to reckon that that trend will continue. Many people believe that the unemployment rate would gradually decline but it has stubbornly stayed above 9%. There are parents of our prospective students that have been without work not for a few months, but often for more than a year. Those folks are making a fundamental readjustment in their thinking. They are looking at their children commuting if they can go to college at all.

We are going to have to be price conscious in a way that we have not been in the past to the same degree. I don’t think we have ever been cavalier but if you were to look at the increase in tuition and fees and room and board over the past ten years the average would be on the order of 8% (some years higher, more recently lower). My own view,
particularly in light of what’s happened at some of our sister colleges this year, Rutgers and Rowan to name but two, is that we will be unlikely to charge tuition and fee increases beyond the rate of inflation for the appreciable future. That reality will be somewhat difficult for us because we are going to continue to run a deficit, at least on its face, for about another three years as we smooth out our enrollment and as we smooth out our debt payments. If we cannot raise funds beyond the rate of inflation through tuition and fees, we have recourse to only one of two options. We either cut expenses or we find some way to increases revenues in an ancillary way, or we do a combination of the two—which is what I expect we will do.

That is causing us to look at budgeting differently than we have in the past. We will be going through a zero-based budgeting exercise over the next three years with one third of the units in each year going through that exercise with our Finance folks. Essentially, that means you assume you start with zero and you justify the expenditures that, in the past, have been historically expected of you, according to your own operational parameters and the mission and vision of the college.

I won’t kid you, the zero based budgeting exercise has two purposes. One purpose is to help you with your planning by having you crystallize your own thinking about where you’re going and the other purpose, frankly, is to find some money. We are going to have to do that. I have asked that the President’s Office budget be included in that first cohort and I will undertake to you to reduce my budget and send some money back to the center in order to help with the deficit that we have. You should feel very comfortable in February asking me how that is going.

There are other implications of these three warning signals (vacancy in our residences, that our applications have not increased appreciably, and that we dropped a spot in the U.S. News and World Report rankings). You may know my official view of the U.S. News and World Report rankings: when we go down, the rankings are invalid and unreliable; when we go up, they are something to be celebrated. But I cannot talk out of both sides of my mouth forever because the fact is that many parents, prospective students, and guidance counselors all look at these rankings. So, we have to ourselves examine why it is that we haven’t done better.

The answer is that in most categories we actually exceed our peers-- in many categories actually, but one. The category in which we are deficient is peer assessment. In other words, we are not well known. Indeed our own recent marketing survey suggests that we are not known at all. So we are going to have to pay significantly more attention to generating data so that we know we are making the best decisions based on the information available to us. Also, we are going to have to focus much more heavily on marketing. I know that will be controversial for some of you and distasteful because “marketing”, as a business term, suggests that we have decided to become the equivalent of a bar of soap or a make of automobile--but we haven’t. The fact is that we need to proclaim our virtues and their allegiant if we expect people to make a choice to come to Ramapo.
I have been not very far south in the state visiting high schools in the past and asked students around the table why they hadn’t applied to Ramapo. They’re polite enough but what they tend to say is that they “never thought of it,” it is not part of their calculus because it hasn’t been impinged on their consciousness. So our marketing dollars are going to be especially needed for enrollment management for attracting the sorts of students that we need to attract. That means of course that we will still have to take money back to the center and it means an increase in personnel costs as well because you cannot do marketing without people. But we believe that we have a very good plan from the STAMATS group that we engaged to do a review of our marketing needs. The good thing about it too is that it should be quantifiable. We should be able to come back to you and say we made some progress and here is how we measured it. If we can’t do that, you have every right to call us on it.

CONCLUSION
So when you ask me about the state of the college, I would say that we have every right to be optimistic especially on a day like this when we walk around and see how beautiful the campus is and then manage to walk out of the evening humidity into air conditioning.

Let me tell you something about air conditioning…I went to Sierra Leone in May. Jackie and I traveled there with our nursing faculty and eight students. They were doing clinical work there and I was basically serving as an intake/data person. The first day, after our luggage hadn’t arrived, I made the calculation that indeed if I did rinse out my underwear and hang them in front of the exhaust fan on the rather rudimentary air conditioner I would be able to have relatively clean ones the next day. So I went ahead and rinsed them and hung them up. However, you cannot count on certain things in Sierra Leone. One of the things on which you cannot count is the continuance of the power grid in the evening, so virtually coincident with my hanging them up was the conking out of the air conditioning unit and the temperature gradually rose to about 95 degrees. If you ever want to feel more comfortable about the heat and the ambient temperature that surrounds you, walk around in damp underpants for a day—it will take your mind off of it.

So I like to think that my own liberal arts education, while it might not have given me the technical perspicacity to have avoided that situation, it provided me with the disposition to bear it gracefully.

I have one item that I have saved for the end. It is fanciful but I love it because it shows that the college contains all sorts of activities and possibilities. This has to do with the Ramapo College Bass Fishing Club. Now, bass fishing is a big deal, obviously among a relatively select group. We had two teams of two students each that placed first and fourth in the National Guard FLW College Fishing Northern Division Regional Championship. Now listen to the data, it was hosted by Penn State on Sayers Lake. The Club, advised by PJ Bartolotto, included students Jeff Voss, Joseph Zapf, Bob Reider, and Charles Danza.

Voss and Zapf went wire to wire each day to win the championship with four bass weighing 5 pounds, 4 ounces, for a three day total of 14 bass weighing 27 pounds 2
ounces. The team beat their closest competitor, Fairmont State University, by 7 pounds 12 ounces.

Now you’re saying to yourself, “I know he’s from Newfoundland which is famous for fishing but isn’t this making rather heavy weather of a relatively isolated incident?”

Well, here is the kicker…the Ramapo Bass Fishing Club took first prize bringing with them back to campus a top award of $50,000-- $25,000 in cash to be split between the college and the club and a Ranger 177TR with a 90-horsepower outboard wrapped in school colors.

I don’t want to forget about our fourth place team, Reider and Danza came on strong in the final round, sacking up four keepers for 4 pounds 13 ounces, and they brought home $5000. Now, I have become quite rapacious. The Club now advances to the National Championship where the first-place team is eligible to win a top award of $100,000.

*FLW Outdoors* noted, and I am going to close on this, "One of the most interesting statistics is the number two – that’s how many teams Ramapo College has in the top five. It’s also the number of years the school’s bass club has existed."

We may be young, but we’re good.

Thank you.