STATE OF THE COLLEGE

Dr. Peter P. Mercer, President

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Hello everyone and welcome to the State of the College address.

This is my seventeenth such address since assuming the office of President in 2005 and, in many ways, there has never been a better time to be at Ramapo College.

BEST OF TIMES, WORST OF TIMES

We are in the midst of a building boom that will significantly enhance our academic facilities, we have just welcomed one of the largest and academically best qualified freshman classes in our history, and we are increasingly recognized as having outstanding faculty, staff and programs. It is, perhaps, to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens, the best of times in Mahwah, New Jersey.

The town of Mahwah was founded in the mid-19th century, around the time that Charles Dickens’ novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, was first published. You will recall how it begins:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Although the novel is set in the years leading to the French Revolution, Dickens was clearly drawing parallels with his own time just as we do now more than a century and a half later. We read every day about the perceived education bubble, the need for deep structural change in the higher education system and the clarion call to reform higher education as a kind of upper tier vocational training enterprise. These do threaten to be the worst of times but it is important to remember that such threats have arisen cyclically for centuries since the first modern universities were established almost one thousand years ago.

BUDGET AND FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

From this historical vantage point, I suggest only one approach makes sense for us and that is to refuse to indulge in apocalyptic hand-wringing and instead deal with the concrete issues that call out to be managed. First among these at Ramapo is a recurring structural budget deficit. Because it is structural, and therefore can’t be solved by a one-time discharge payment, it must be solved structurally. This was a theme of the faculty ad hoc Budget Committee Report, and it is a theme of the Financial Sustainability Task Force Report presented to me less than two weeks ago. I thank both of those groups for
their thoughtfulness and diligence.

I am still digesting Task Force’s lengthy and expansive report and have yet to even discuss it with the Board of Trustees, but two things are clear:

- first, we can fix the structural deficit by working together; and
- second, to do so will require sacrifice from every single one of us.

I will be addressing this topic directly throughout this academic year.

GOVERNANCE

This semester promises to be especially busy on other fronts as well. The Facilities Master Plan goes to the Board of Trustees at its September 30th meeting and the committee to produce the Periodic Review Report for the Middle States Commission has started work. The particular challenge there will be to present a model of an entity that fits into our governance structure while allowing broad constituency representation.

Shortly, Provost Barnett has released finalized Academic Plan and I encourage you to comment on it as well. Finally, the Chief Planning Officer, Dorothy Tobe, will be establishing an implementation team to review the plans that individual units develop to achieve the Strategic Plan’s objectives.

BAFFING IN TRENTON

Now before I get to my next point, I want to follow a relatively new tradition and bring you a new word from the Dictionary of Newfoundland English. That word is “baff” meaning “to beat or strike or wear down.” So, one might say, for example, “the issue of a rational funding formula for New Jersey institutions of higher learning, is all baffed out.”

One might say that but one would be wrong as the issue is finally coming to the fore. Last month, state Senator Cunningham introduced a bill which would establish the New Jersey Higher Education Funding Formula Commission to examine higher education funding formulas in other states including a review of performance based funding and best practices. The Commission is to develop a report that includes a funding formula for the state as well as recommendations for legislative or regulatory action.

As someone who has harped on this issue for years I am glad to see the baffing of the legislature and I have expressed my strong interest in being one of the 11 members who will be appointed to the Commission. And while on the matter of appointments, I have been invited to serve as an international observer of the Presidential election in El Salvador in February. Whether I accept the invitation will depend on being assured that any safety risks are adequately mitigated.

STUDENT ADVOCACY
Closer to home, I want to say how impressed I am by the freshman class and their level of energy and enthusiasm. I have already had several meetings with Vinnie Guinta, Student Government Association President, and his colleagues and with Student Trustees Anthony Darakjy and Kevin Ng, and I think we are in for a good year on campus.

One initiative that I am glad to see the SGA taking up is the Village Housing Agreement. The Department of Public Safety sometimes gets a bad rap because they intervene too readily. But they have little choice when they are the first and only ones called to intervene. I am hoping that this year we can move to greater monitoring by students of student behavior.

THOUGHTFUL GIFTS

On another note, the College has secured a $500,000 gift to plan for and launch a new Center of excellence at the College, The Krame Center for Contemplative Science and Mindful Living. A task force has met for the last six months to establish Ramapo College as a distinctive center for education, training, personal enrichment, consultation, and research on the philosophical concepts and applied practices associated with mindfulness. This is an exciting new initiative that offers many opportunities for research, student and community programs and educational outreach.

I am honored to also share that we have received a significant gift from Dr. and Mrs. Anthony Padovano to advance the College Commons. As you are aware we have planned to convert the historic stone building on campus to a place where faculty and staff can socialize and convene during the day and where students can gather in a coffee house atmosphere, with comfortable furniture, conversation areas and food service. The Board of Trustees has approved the name of the building to be the Padovano Commons in recognition of the Padovanos’ generosity (and we wish Dr. Padovano a very happy birthday today).

THIS COFFEE CUP IS HALF FULL

Finally, knowing more about our alumni can help us better engage them in campus activities such as mentoring students, facilitating internships, speaking to classes, and becoming involved in alumni activities. As well this information can be vital to the Admissions Office in all of our recruitment efforts. Thus the Foundation has set up a small incentive program. Faculty and staff, you are asked to please share a success story about an alumnus – maybe attending a prominent graduate program, advancing in their career, receiving an award, engaging in public service. When you do share a success story – you are invited to enjoy a free cup of coffee or tea in the Atrium dining facility compliments of the Foundation.

Thank you.

QUESTION AND ANSWER