A decade can pass quickly. Ten years ago this week, our nation was still raw and reeling from the tragedy of 9/11. We gathered here then, struggling to absorb the enormity of the loss and facing a dawning recognition of the deep divisions, problems, and conflicts that troubled our world.

We emerged from that time and those sad days with a new awareness that what we do—as a people, as a nation, as individuals, and even as a university—matters. Our reawakening sense of global responsibility and engagement caused us to look anew at our land-grant mission and to recognize that, in this post-9/11 world, it remains as relevant and important for today’s world as it was when it was freshly minted in the 19th century. The education we provide our students—grounded in service, character, and collaboration—prepares them to be compassionate and informed leaders and citizens. And our research, and the ways in which we extend it, improves lives worldwide.

And true to this mission over the past decade, our faculty and students have been extraordinary global ambassadors—combating infectious disease in Mexico and air pollution in the Philippines; building a safe, reliable water supply for a village in Latin America; and partnering with Chinese institutions to advance agricultural and energy research. We have been pleased, as well, to welcome the world to our campus—as we did last week at our International Colloquium—and as we do throughout the year thanks to a record number of international students.

Much of this progress did not come during an easy time. Three years ago we stood here at the brink of the worst financial crisis in most of our lifetimes, and we talked of making sure that CSU survived, of the importance of upholding our access mission, of making sure that in another century a family could arrive at the Oval with confidence that their son or daughter would find access to a world-class education regardless of their economic class or status. We’ve been pleased with how we’ve responded to these challenges. But we should be honest: as we stood here, it was difficult to imagine that we could sustain the kinds of cuts we’ve faced these last three years and not be significantly diminished as an institution.

And yet even as we wrestled with those silent doubts, this university dared to dream. We dared to imagine not only surviving, not simply maintaining, but thriving. And we have.
Today, we have balanced all of the budget cuts from the economic downturn, and even though our state looks to take the last of its own budget reductions and we know that this will likely result in another round of public funding reductions for our university, we stand together rightfully proud of all that we have accomplished in spite of the storm that has raged around us.

We learned this week that we once again rank in the top tier of American colleges and universities in *U.S. News and World Report* - singled out along with Brown, Duke, Harvard, and Cornell as schools that have done an outstanding job of infusing writing across the curriculum.

Despite a shrinking R&D pie, our research has grown. CSU grew its annual research spending nearly 10 percent last year—to a record high of more than $330M. And while many people, including Bill Farland’s team, share this credit, this increase serves as a marker for something that I like to talk about at every opportunity—CSU has one of the most productive faculties of any university in the country.

- In the last year, for example, Jan Leach, John McKay and Dan Bush did important biofuels work with the U.S. Departments of Energy and Agriculture.
- Our economics and business faculty continued their landmark collaboration with the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi.
- Faculty in Human Development and Family Studies spearheaded the expansion of our Early Childhood Center into the historic Washington School—a great new home for one of our signature programs.
- Stan Slater from the College of Business was honored for lifetime contributions by the American Marketing Association Foundation.
- I was personally honored to accompany Evan Vlachos when he received an honorary doctorate from one of the most prominent universities in Greece, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.
- And when did any of us pass the UCA, see the filled parking lots, and fail to be reminded of the enrichment that our student and faculty artists bring to our community?

And these are only a few examples. In every corner of this university, every day, professors like these are transforming our world and the lives of our students through their work. At a time when some are arguing that the state ought to walk away from funding higher education, the value the CSU faculty brings to our world makes that a very tough argument to sustain.
We had good news on other fronts as well. The Campaign for Colorado State University had a very successful year, and we head into the final months of the campaign with full confidence that we will meet our half-billion dollar goal. To date, the Campaign has funded 418 new scholarships and 14 new faculty positions. And last year we saw a 47 percent increase in private gift fundraising last year, raising more than $85M – the second best fundraising year in university history.

And we remained the school of choice in Colorado, enrolling more Colorado high-school graduates than any other campus in the state. This year’s freshman class is the largest, the most diverse, and the most academically qualified in CSU history. They’re drawn here by the quality of our academic programs - but also by the environment and the strong sense of support they receive from faculty and staff across campus.

Provost Miranda, Vice President Hughes, myself and others frequently receive letters from parents and students explaining that the feeling of connection, of welcoming, almost of family – whether given by faculty members, admissions staff or just an interaction with a typical CSU employee or student during a visit here tipped the scales, causing them to pick CSU over many other fine universities. Earlier this week, Rick and I received a letter from an 8th grader in Arizona who had visited our campus and wants to come here to study science and writing because she loves the atmosphere.

And speaking of atmosphere: having gone through another great Ram Welcome, I can say with confidence that we do an outstanding job welcoming our students to CSU. As a parent with daughters at three different institutions, I’d argue that I haven’t seen anyone who does it better and Dr. Hughes and her team deserve our thanks.

And CSU’s success, of course, extends beyond our campus. Across the state, our Forest Service kept us safe this summer, our experiment station employees helped our agriculture industry feed the world, and our extension agents made sure that every citizen of Colorado had a local portal to their Land Grant university. Governor Hickenlooper’s office tapped Kathay Rennels out of Extension to assist in developing the Colorado economic blueprint through community engagement.

Of course, the commonality in all of the success stories is people. Great staff, wonderful students, an amazing faculty, an extraordinarily talented group of deans, and a very hardworking Cabinet—CSU is blessed with great people.

Teaching & Learning, research & discovery, engagement and service to our society: even in these challenging times, Colorado State is alive and well.
But we do not stand where we stand today because 3 years ago—or 7 years ago—or at any point in CSU history—we failed to look to the future. We need to look – as those before us have - at where we need to go.

In 9 years, we’ll celebrate CSU’s 150th birthday, and it’s not too soon to start asking where we want to be at that milestone. I’m sure that we’ll still be a leading research university; that we will still be actively engaged across Colorado and the world; and that we’ll be the leader in educating of Coloradoans and preparing our workforce.

But what changes do we have to make now, today, to make sure that the future we hope for is the one we achieve?

- Vice President for Engagement, Lou Swanson, will need to continue to explore new definitions of engagement in a 21st century context.
- Vice President for Research, Bill Farland, has recently led an assessment of our research climate and he’ll need to be working with research leaders across our campus to foster the environment that supports discovery and innovation.
- Vice President for University Operations, Amy Parsons, will never stop working to make sure CSU is a great place for people to spend their entire working careers.
- And many of us, led by Provost Miranda, our Deans and our Department Chairs, will need to be involved in making sure that the research that serves as the foundation of Colorado State is integrated with our teaching and learning such that every student who wants to pursue undergraduate research and creativity has that option.

Attaining that opportunity for EVERY student will be a challenge….but if the last 3 years have shown us anything, they have shown us that we respond best to a challenge that we jointly share. So I’d like to lay out a challenge today for your consideration.

We know how to get students in the door at CSU. We have admissions professionals who spend a great amount of time and effort deciding if someone has what it takes to succeed here. We’re in our 3rd consecutive year of record enrollment with constantly improving academic qualifications. We also know how to welcome students and get them off to a good start in their living communities. And we have highly effective educators—a committed faculty prepared to get them through their education.

So with those ingredients, we should be able to graduate almost every student. But we don’t.

In fact, our four year graduation rates are in the 40%’s and our 6 year rates are below 70%. These numbers have been improving--thanks to some very hard, focused work by many of you—but they are too low and we should not accept them. These numbers are significantly better than the numbers reported by many American colleges and universities—we’re among the best in Colorado and one of only two in the state to beat our predicted graduation rates.
But that shouldn’t satisfy us. None of us as members of the Colorado State University faculty have achieved our success by settling for less than 70% on an exam or being in the 42% percentile on our grant applications. So why are we willing to accept that a third of our students won’t graduate? We ought to be troubled by this.

Now we know that things outside our control can and will affect some of our students. And we know that not all students move through their educational experience in the same way. And we know that this university is stretched thin from three years of budget and staffing cuts. And we know that improving retention and graduation rates is not a problem unique to CSU. The annual cost of subpar graduation rates in the U.S. is estimated at $4.5B and Colorado taxpayers annually spend $2.5M on students who don’t graduate.

But this is not a university that rationalizes performance in the context of others or settles for anything less than excellence.

And let’s be very clear—we will not confuse rigor and standards with success in this discussion. No one is talking about compromising quality to get students out the door. This is an exceptional university because it is committed to providing a great education and is rooted in rigor. But rigor is not anathema to success.

A six-year graduation rate of 64% today when the average among our peer institutions is 71% - and many of our peers are higher than that – is not up to the CSU standard of excellence.

There is simply no reason we can’t aim for an 80% six-year graduation rate (the top of our pier group)—and a 60% four-year rate— and aim to get there in five years.

And we’re not starting from scratch. In fact, for the last several years, under the able leadership of Paul Thayer, Alan Lamborn, Blanche Hughes and many others, we’ve made a concerted effort to improve retention and graduation rates that has, in fact, yielded some notable gains. Our numbers are improving. We have more programs to help improve curricular development. About a third of our students are now in learning communities. More faculty take advantage of the services TILT provides to foster improved teaching & learning. We’ve reached an historic high in the number of students persisting from the first to the second year, and we’re the best among our peers in closing the graduation gap among white students and students of color – in fact, we can see to where that gap is just a bad memory.

Those are some tremendous improvements, and we haven’t yet even reached the halfway mark on implementation of our campuswide retention plan.

That’s the good news. But there’s still a long way to go and more of us need to share the responsibility along with Alan and Paul and Blanche for the improvements we need to make.
This university has been committed to excellence in all it’s done, throughout its history. Over the past three years, we’ve dealt with a long string of extraordinary challenges and we have another challenging year ahead of us. And it’s fair to ask if this is the time for a challenge like this. Are we up to this challenge?

We wouldn’t stand where we stand today with the points of pride we’ve been talking about if we were the type just to shrug our shoulders, give up, and walk away from a problem. As we look toward the future, as we seek to build a truly great American university, and as we continue to argue the importance of public higher education, we simply must do better.

We have the raw materials we need to be successful - qualified students & committed educators. And there is no aspect of our mission that is more important than this one: We exist to educate and graduate our students.

So in that light, I have asked Provost Miranda and VPs Lamborn and Hughes to redouble our efforts in support of retention and graduation, to engage the campus community –our faculty, staff and students - in planning and in action—so that whoever is standing at this podium 9 years from today, on the 150th birthday of Colorado State University, can look out at the students, faculty, staff, alumni and people who care so deeply about this institution and say, “Thank you and congratulations” for a job well done.

The stakes are high. Behind each statistic, funding discussion and percentage point there are people--our students—a freshman journalism major from Niwot, a sophomore math major from Alamosa, a junior business major from Chicago—different genders and different races, 1st generation scholars and legacy students. But they all came here with hopes and aspirations and promise. They all came here believing that this is the best university for them. They all came here intending to graduate.

We owe it to them to take up this challenge as an entire campus community. I believe it is in our power to do better. Together, and true to our heritage – indeed true to the legacy of Colorado State University - we will.

It continues to be my great honor to serve and represent you as the president of our university. Thank you for that privilege.