Hi, my name is Frank Wu. I have the honor of serving as your president at Queens College. This is the first opportunity that I’ve had to give a State of the College address.

What I’d like to do today is set forth a vision. We’re engaged in strategic planning right now, and you’re very much a part of that. So everything that I have to say will be adjusted based on what YOU have to say. I’d like to listen more than I talk. But today, let me explain a little bit about why I came here and what I hope to do.

I was attracted to Queens College because of the diversity of the borough. We’re the most diverse place on the face of the planet. And because at Queens College, we still believe in the power of higher education as the engine of the American dream. Our motto as an institution is “We Learn so That We May Serve.” My personal motto is “I serve, so that our students may learn.”

As you know, a liberal arts education is central to our mission. It provides students with a well-rounded education that will best prepare them for the multitude of opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. In this talk, I’d like to set forth a vision for practical liberal arts, a school for the double major and triple major, for the accelerated master’s degree student.

In one sentence—in one word, my vision is students. It’s to put students at the center of all that we do. That’s the test for everything. Will it help students? There’s one other word I would add—so it’s really two words. And that word is “All.” Meaning not just this student, or that student. It’s each and every one. Student success is the defining metric. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are integral in all that we do. That’s why we were founded. That’s the whole point of the CUNY system. Students. All students.

To that end, we hope to start a business school and an art school to meet the needs of students and the demands of the marketplace. We’ll advocate together for the funding our students deserve. We’ll make it through the pandemic and adapt for the digital natives who are our incoming students. We’ll make good on the social contract—the mutual promise that we made to one another—to embrace American ideals.

Let me talk a little about academics, the budget, diversity and then about the pandemic.

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ACADEMICS

Let’s start with academics because that’s the core of what we do. Student success. That’s what we’re here for. We’ll be doing more with technology and metrics and creating digital workflow. Our students—they’re what’s called digital natives, not like many of us. We’re digital immigrants. We remember the world before the internet. When people used pen and paper. That seems antiquated…old-school now. Although I still carry a fountain pen and jot notes in a notebook. But we live in their world. I remind myself of that. For our students, well, what I remember as new, is for them old. Anyone else remember VHS cassettes and recording favorite TV shows that you wanted to watch? That’s before we could binge anything by streaming it.

When we look at what our students want and what they wish for, and we look at what the market offers opportunities in, it’s apparent that we have so much already that could form a business school. So we’re going to bundle together our business offerings and phase in, over time, a business school. Later, we’ll look at how to expand it to serve the students and market even better.

But it’s not just about business, it’s about the arts as well. I’ve been so impressed learning about the Aaron Copland School and our offerings in theater, drama, dance, photography, writing, and digital media. In every kind of art, we excel. We have such strengths.

You’ve probably seen the Pixar movie, Soul. The main character was created with the help of Dr. Peter Archer, a middle school band teacher in Bayside and a 1985 graduate of the Queens College Aaron Copland School of Music, who served as a consultant for the Golden Globe-nominated film. If you haven’t seen it, I recommend it to you. It not only captures what it’s like to have a passion—jazz—it vividly depicts our borough in such a wonderful, literally animated and authentic manner.

It’s not just Peter Archer. He’s exemplary. But all the graduates. All the faculty. WOW! The work that they do, creatively, it’s so impressive! Without doing anything more, if we just put together, everything that we have in the arts and bundle it, we’ll have a first-rate arts school. Business and the Arts. They actually go together in arts administration.

Some people might think, well, liberal arts that’s not so practical. But it is. We know that. If we give our students the tools to always adapt and be agile. Their parents maybe want them to major in something different than what they want to major in. But if we offer them the double major or the major and the minor, such as business and liberal arts, there’s an opportunity there to blend skill sets. That’s who the future will belong to. People who don’t just do one thing well—they do two or three things well.

Both the Business and the Arts School will offer opportunities to communities and individuals that have been underserved and historically excluded in business and the arts, not to mention arts administration. I’m so proud that the first cohort of QC in 4 is about to graduate. As I look at them, I think, there’s an opportunity, again for us, to not just get every student in QC in 4 but to really grow the accelerated graduate degree programs.

The marketplace is so demanding. The standards keep going up. Now it’s not enough for many jobs to have an undergraduate degree. You need the graduate degree too. We can offer it in a more effective manner. Because the programs that we have are so successful, if you can do just a little bit more, a little bit faster, you’ll come out with that competitive edge. Our career placement is enhanced by the CUNY initiative working with major employers in the New York City metro area. I want to look at how we can enhance the certificates and micro-credentials as well. Our goal is to train people to be productive and fulfilled within this ever-changing economy of ours.

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BUDGET

Let me turn then to the budget for a moment. We need to advocate together. We have the same goal, though maybe different tactics. Public higher education—it’s not charity. It’s an investment, in us as an institution, in our students. It’s actually those students who are the most effective messengers because they’re the constituents of the public officials whom we need to persuade. There’s been a change over the past couple of generations. And what we once took for granted, we can’t anymore, that everyone should have the opportunity to earn a Queens College degree. Well, some people are pessimists. They don’t embrace that public good as much as I know all of us do. Let’s win them over. Let’s show them as we did with the study that we put out just a year ago. For every dollar spent—for every tax dollar spent educating students attending Queens College, taxpayers receive an average of $4.90, almost $5.00, in return over the course of their working lives of those alumni. Because our graduates go on to create small businesses, they employ people whether or not those individuals were our graduates. So Queens College contributes to the economy for ALL.

Most of our budget comes from the State of New York. The City of New York puts in some as well. But for the four-year schools in the CUNY system, it’s about 60 percent that comes from the state of New York. So we need to persuade those folks in Albany—and many of them are already our friends—that this is a worthwhile endeavor to support. At every opportunity, I meet with government leaders on the federal, state, and local level to advocate for funding on your behalf.

Private philanthropy is so indispensable. It’s a supplement, not a substitute to the public funding. Our Office of Institutional Advancement—they’re terrific. I’ve been in higher education leadership going on 11 years now. I’ve never seen a better team. They raise 12–13 million dollars per year. That’s what enabled the Queens College Foundation, which is run by an independent board to allocate emergency resources—a total of three million dollars. They’ve never done that before. We all owe them a debt of gratitude.

99 percent of that money goes direct to students—in RISE scholarships, athletics scholarships, and the food pantry. As we know, some among us suffer from food insecurity. We need to support them. The Knights Table is actually taking the shuttle bus and going out into neighborhoods to deliver bags of foods and gift cards. We know that our students, by and large, don’t come from backgrounds of great privilege. But if we enable them, if we empower them, not crush them under student debt, they will go on to the greatest success. They will achieve aspirations that aren’t just for them. These are the aspirations of grandparents and parents, who risked peril to journey to a new world. They’re the aspirations of an entire community who sees the first generation go off to college.

That’s why diversity, equity, and inclusion are so important. It’s a personal priority of mine. I have been associated in my career with a historically black institution, a unique school for the deaf, and worked as an advocate for the undocumented and participated in decisions recognizing gay equality and gender equity. That isn’t enough though. I’m here because this is what Queens College is all about. We’ve always been about diversity, equity, and inclusion—long before it became a fashionable buzz word.

So Queens College, I know it’s the place for me. I want everyone else to feel it’s the place for them too. We have 83 languages spoken on campus and at the homes of our students. Our School of Education has long held a lead role producing teachers and administrators for this diverse borough. When I walk up Kissena Boulevard, I am struck at how central we are to the borough…it’s a powerhouse. If you ride the #7 train, it’s the United Nations express. That’s what New York City has always been. It’s a beacon of hope that beckons the world over.

After President Gerald Ford, way back in the 70s, refused federal assistance—you remember those headlines. After 9/11. After Superstorm Sandy, it’s always been like that line from the hit musical Hamilton…immigrants, they get the job done. Their children and grandchildren as well.

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There is diversity within diversity. I know that for
some, this story of arrival is not the same. Because their
ancestors came in bondage. They or their ancestors
joined the Great Migration from the segregated South.
I want to recognize that there is a range of experiences
and opinions. Diversity is like democracy. A process,
not an outcome. It demands engagement, constant
participation.

We benefit from having CERRU, on our campus,
recognized as experts from around the nation for their
diversity work. We’re hiring a chief diversity officer.
We want to use data through tools such as Navigate
and Coursedoc to emphasize recruitment, retention,
and graduation.

PANDEMIC

Let me turn to the pandemic. I’ve put this at the very
end, because it will end. Although unprecedented has
become a bit of cliché, it’s no less true. None of us have
ever witnessed, much less lived through something
like this. And we will make it through. I’m actually
glad to have started my job when we face such a clear,
external threat. We realize that we have no choice but
to cooperate. Queens College has a role to play—a
vital role in the rebuilding process that won’t be just
days and weeks—it will be months and years. We’re a
school. We teach. But we’re also a place for important
research and creative expression. Beyond that, we’re an
employer. A real estate developer. A cultural center. A
civic space.

I want to send many thanks to the Math and Natural
Sciences School and John Denney for their innovation
in COVID-19 testing, recognized nationally, and put
into use on our campus. I’ve so enjoyed visiting labs,
especially seeing students hard at work alongside
their professors, even now—with masks and social
distancing. Many of our faculty have integrated lessons
about the pandemic into their courses—about the
history of disease, the consequences, about how best to
adjust in pedagogy.

For the summer, we’ve already announced, we will
remain virtual. In Fall 2021, we’ll start back in person.
I don’t mean we will rush pell-mell and pretend nothing
ever happened. No, we’re going to do this knowing we
have to adapt constantly and adjust. We’ll be guided
by the science and safety and we’ll ensure that for our
students, what we’ve learned during the pandemic about
education—virtual education—we’ll take the best of
that and offer multiple options to them.

The social contract has come to the forefront. I wear a
mask so that I don’t just help myself. I help you. I trust
you’ll do the same for me. It doesn’t make any of us
less of a leader to recognize that. Pretending to be a
tough guy or tough gal, well, that’s not going to prevent
continued flare-ups of COVID-19. Even once we’re
back, we’re going to need to wear those face masks and
socially distance. The future won’t be the same as the
past. It never is. But it will be better if we make it so.

I know that progress is not automatic. We need to
think about what students, need, want and deserve.
What we’ve learned about the different modalities
of pedagogy—those techniques that we use to teach.
Many want classes in person. I yearn to be able to see
old friends and meet new ones. But some will still want
classes online, too. Maybe that big lecture at 8 am—
well, you’ll be more inclined to attend if you don’t
have to trudge through the snow just to do that. Maybe
we’ll mix and match a bit. That’s why we have strategic
planning. We want to find out directly from you. What
is it that you see Queens College as being, becoming? I
want to thank everyone who’s been involved—a much
wider range of people than is typical—and also the
folks in our working group for reopening. They’ve been
meeting every week. That’s where I receive the advice
and counsel that’s so valuable, it’s all about teamwork.

This has been a time of conflict and division. It’s been a
time—as one commentator described: as malice toward
all. Not in the words of Abraham Lincoln—malice
toward none. When the nation was broken asunder, in
his first inaugural address, Lincoln at the ending said
“I loathe to close. We are not enemies, but friends.

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We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

Four years later, when it was apparent the union would eventually prevail but there would be continued fighting before the result was achieved, before Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Lincoln declared in his inimitable style at once humble and profound: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds.”

Many of you I have met. Some of you, I haven’t met yet. I strive to meet every member of faculty and staff and every student who crosses my path. And I mean meet in person, not on a screen. This will have to do, for now. When I walk across our beautiful campus, I want to thank every worker who has been coming in. That’s what this ceremony today is all about. I am just like you. A child of newcomers who believed in the American dream, empowered by higher education. This is what I want to do within our community. We’ve been tested. We’ve survived. Now we must help our students to thrive. Thank you so much.

Queens College Workers Tribute

Over the past year, as the pandemic has raged on, many brave and selfless employees of Queens College have continued to come to the college on a regular basis in order to maintain our beautiful campus and keep it safe.

Following the State of the College address, there was a special video presentation, which featured interviews from Megan Moore-Wilk, Troy Hahn, Zeco Krcic, Jennifer Jarvis, and Deborah Huggins, that honored the following employees of Queens College:

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR ON-CAMPUS EMPLOYEES

Salina Abdul
Mitra Adjoda
Shivanandra Adjoda
Graham Corey Ahern
Vanessa Aklassou
Joey Alfandari
Cecilia C. Alves
Paim Amarjit
Providenza Anteri
Yifat Anteri
Nohora Ardila
Paola Arenas
David Arizmendy
Olusoji Awogbemi
Christian Baez
Madelin Baez
Laura Ballesty
Ricardo Barco
Amparo Barrera
Ryan Barth
Alan Bartow
Marlyne Bastien
Annette Beckford
Nurjahan Begum
Beka Bekouiri
Dhanya Bell
Algie Benn
Kathleen Berta
Jose Betances
Marie Birne
Enville Black
Margaret Blaha
Craig Blodgett
Devin Boissoeau
Rueben Borroco
Haiman Boxer
Roland Brooks
Eton Brooks
Leighton Brown
Richard Campbell
Cesar Castillo
Josefa Cazares
Sunny Ho Chan
Peter Chen
Jane Cho
Matthew Cislyucis
Roland Clark
Edgar Clarke
Rigoberto Cointet
Delores Coley
Marva Collins
Maria S. Cora
Jonathan Corbin
Melida Cortes
Yolanda Cortijo
Ruby Coyoc
Glen Crutch
Ramona Cruz
Beatriz Cuellar
Husni Darwish
Dane Davis
Mike Deering
Aldo Delgado
Marco Dellacruz
Casey Denett
Nathanael Desulme
Yasoda Dhanraj
Robert Dochnahl
Xhesi Domi
Randy Dorcelet

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