I want to address a question that’s been on many peoples’ minds and tell you, right up front, that we can consider the directive memo to be off the table. Back in January, when it was released, our budget outlook presented stark challenges. But the Governor’s unexpected restoration of the CSU’s funding, together with the newest Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF), allow us to approach our budget planning from a fresh start.

As Vice President Wilson and Vice Provost Banks have affirmed, we’re now in an active budget planning phase. A number of key questions are still open: enrollment remains unpredictable, and the challenges of building a fall schedule under the lingering effects of COVID are significant and stressful for our faculty, chairs, and staff. But the new HEERF funds will help smooth some of these challenges, by covering the added costs of classes made smaller through social distancing, along with the safety measures that would have strained our general fund. At least now we can focus on the hard logistics without the further stress that deep cuts would have added. At a time when so much is in flux, the challenge of planning for the fall is complicated enough, and I’m glad that our improved financial outlook gives us all one less emergency to deal with.

I want to thank the faculty and staff who reached out to me to share their concerns, feedback, and experiences. These past weeks and months have been hard, and I want to acknowledge the hurt, stress, and alarm that many have expressed, not only about our budget, but also about processes and systems that left many feeling left out and undervalued. Though we’re now out of emergency mode, I’m grateful for what I learned.

I also heard a strong request: rather than imposing solutions from the top, that we instead set clear targets but allow flexibility and creativity where we can, to allow the colleges and programs to find solutions that are right for them, and the students they serve. I want to affirm the value of collaborative planning in this model, and the college deans join me in its support. Toward this end, colleges have just been given enrollment projections that include specific targets for areas of high student need. Instructional funding will be built around those targets in a way that ensures that no college should have to cut back on the courses students need in order to fund its operations, which will be budgeted as well. Then the colleges will develop budget plans that support the best schedules, with the right balance and mix of courses and course sizes, that will give our students the educational experience that they need and deserve. Decentralized planning works best when driven by clear, shared goals. The goals of student learning, retention, and degree progress should drive everything we do, and we need to keep our eyes constantly open to make sure we’re doing right by our students. One drawback to decentralized planning is that it can also create inequities, particularly for smaller colleges and units, so I’m eager to support the recommendations of the Faculty Work Assignment Distribution Task Force in setting consistent standards and fair measures across the colleges.

In the weeks ahead I’ll be working with the deans and other academic leaders to assess the savings we’ve created in Academic Affairs, and consider how to distribute them to rebuild our
infrastructure and offices for the next fiscal year, especially through staff hiring. The loss of staff to the hiring chill and layoffs has affected morale and threatened our operations, and we need to rebuild our offices by matching our available resources with our priority needs. After addressing our most urgent staff needs, I expect to be able to move ahead with some tenure-track hiring; guidelines will be shared with the chairs after spring break.

Our improved financial outlook doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t continue to look for opportunities to create savings. We know that we’re underfunded, and our needs will probably always exceed our resources. But with savings, we can make strategic investments—like graduate tuition remission, for example—which could ultimately grow enrollments, strengthen our programs, and generate more revenue toward further investments.

We’re coming out of a very hard year, but we have incredible academic strengths—a world-class faculty, pathbreaking programs, and amazing students—and I know we’ll advance them into the future by working together and thinking ahead.