As I looked forward to this breakfast last week, I couldn’t help but recall my first visit to campus. It was November and I was doing my “secret shopper” gig, checking out a campus I’d heard was looking for a new chancellor.

I remember this because I believe in first impressions. They do tell you a lot. My first impressions told me this was a pretty extraordinary place. The people I talked to as I walked around campus impressed me. You smiled and looked me in the eye. You offered to help. I could tell you are proud of this place.

The students wowed me too. They talked about how much they loved it here. They told me about their favorite professors and where they were planning to travel or intern.

The feel of this place was so invigorating. I saw traditions here, from the excellence banners outside Schofield to the flyers in Davies advertising a cappella performances to the forensic trophies overflowing the cases in Hibbard.

And, I also saw the future. The new Centennial building was under construction. I heard excited talk about a Confluence Arts Center and about the Blugold Commitment that put high-impact experiences front and center. This was a place with a Big Future. I could see it and feel it and I wanted to be part of UW-Eau Claire’s Big Future too!

Fast forward two years. If I were to characterize the past year, I think I’d call it the year of “Big Cuts.” The elephant in the room this morning is the state budget. Since January we’ve been grappling, first with uncertainty, and then with the cold, hard fact of a $250 million base reduction to UW System. That translates to a whopping $7.7 million reduction to UW-Eau Claire, effective now. Colleagues, that’s a 26 percent cut in our state funding, an unprecedented blow when coupled with the third and fourth year of a tuition freeze.

This cut, added to our previous deficit, requires us to take $12.2 million out of our base budget. This year. Out of the budget that funds our teaching staff and the core of our academic mission. Frankly, the budget blew away everything else on my agenda for the past year.

All summer people have asked me, sometimes jokingly and sometimes seriously, did I regret coming to UW-Eau Claire? Has that Big Future I saw been swallowed up by the Big Cuts?

I want to tell you all this morning that my answer is and always will be NEVER! I don’t regret my decision to become your chancellor for one moment. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, and do you know why? Because of you.

This campus continues to exceed my hopes and dreams. When I challenged you all to tackle this budget differently, you responded. More than 120 of you volunteered for Rapid Action Task Forces. Hundreds of you responded to their ideas and added your own. Our conversations this year, at more than a dozen forums and informal coffees, were thoughtful, provocative, honest. We have faced this challenge together and the budget decisions we are making are better because of it.
UW-Eau Claire, do you know how unique you are?

Last month I visited the offices of Inside Higher Ed in Washington, D.C., to talk about this university. They asked me, of course, about the Wisconsin budget. What I didn’t anticipate was the grilling I got about how we were handling it.

When the article came out — you can find it linked on our website — it held up UW-Eau Claire as an example for higher education. It sparked an online conversation about how different we are from most other institutions. And our Foundation even received an out-of-state donation from someone who isn’t a Blugold but who wanted to do what she could to help us handle the cut.

The hard work of addressing this budget challenge isn’t just a horrible distraction that we have to get through as quickly as possible — slap on some across-the-board cuts, cripple our academic excellence and limp on.

No, this budget is the test of who we truly are. We demonstrate our leadership by how we tackle adversity and how we preserve what’s most vital. We are modeling — for our students, for Wisconsin, for the nation — the creativity, the critical insight, the empathy and the intellectual courage required of academic leaders.

Recognize those attributes? Creativity, critical insight, empathy, intellectual courage? Drawn straight from our mission statement, right from our definition of a liberal education.

That’s what we’ve been doing this year, messy and scary as it has been. We are using the attributes of a liberal education to handle unprecedented change.

We began by being clear about our principles. First and foremost, we said we must preserve our commitment to our students and our distinctive learning experiences. Second, we would put our energies into innovation, figuring out better ways to preserve excellence in the face of cuts. And third, we said we would commit to streamlining so we don’t ask everyone to just do more with less.

These aren’t just principles. It’s how we’ve worked together this year. This year, despite our uncertainty, you helped Admissions recruit the largest entering class in two decades. Of course, we’re graduating more students as well, so our focus on recruitment and retention must continue.

That dedication to students is what powers our decisions for how we cut $12.2 million. Daniel Burnham, who helped to design Chicago’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, once said, “Make no little plans.” We took that to heart and are using strategies we have never used before. Later this week I will hold two budget forums to walk through the details of our budget framework. I encourage you all to attend.

I don’t want to go into detail this morning — spreadsheets and breakfast don’t really go well together. But I do want to provide a brief overview and, I hope, allay some concerns up front.

First, our budget will rely heavily on the savings from the voluntary separation incentive program, which contributed more than $4 million to meeting our cut. We will capture more than 60 vacant positions, some of which were faculty lines that funded part-time instructional staff whose contracts have not been renewed. Including VSIP, we have a total of 168 FTE that will be reduced on this campus, 69 of which are faculty or instructional staff positions.
The loss of this many positions, especially from the classroom, will be felt across the campus. I do not want to minimize this loss and the impact it will have, but we have tried very hard to protect classroom instruction. Of our total budget reductions, 36 percent came from faculty and instructional academic staff, while we have taken 64 percent of the cuts from non-classroom budgets.

I want you to know our budget framework is comprehensive and touches every division. We are asking for increased contributions from our auxiliary units and from the Foundation, which will now fund all Foundation and Alumni Association staff. And it includes savings from reductions to administration — I will cut more than 25 percent of the positions with chancellor or dean in the title.

Significantly, we must reduce $2 million from Facilities, about $700,000 of which still must be realized. We will use the recommendations from the Sodexo report to help us identify strategies — that report was shared with you last week and can be found on the university budget updates web page. We know, for example, that there can be savings through centralized purchasing and by cutting back on renovation projects. But, realistically, there will need to be some additional involuntary layoffs to this division, as well as a handful from other units across campus.

I had hoped to be able to announce all staff reduction decisions before this breakfast. But because the VSIP decisions were not finalized until late summer, and we are still seeking comments on our Facilities reorganization, I will not meet that deadline.

But, I do not want to perpetuate uncertainty. Some of you have told me you come to work every day practically sick, wondering if you will have a job. So, I want to assure you this morning that additional staff reductions due to this budget will be determined by the end of October. Academic contracts will be honored and non-instructional positions affected by the budget will be retained until at least February 1, 2016. This will provide non-instructional staff with a full three months’ notice.

I also want to assure the campus that individuals whose positions are terminated will be able to interview for future job openings for which they are qualified. And we will be looking to find people internally to fill new positions that are created in our consolidated service centers.

We will not be the same UW-Eau Claire next year. We WILL be leaner and our faculty will be teaching larger classes. I am grateful for many faculty and staff who are accepting more responsibilities during this transition and are stepping up to help us save resources.

But, without 168 of our colleagues we must fundamentally change how we operate or our quality and service to our students will suffer.

Trying to work harder doing everything we’ve always done will only make us tired, bitter and demoralized. Together, we are going to make some big changes, and claim lots of small victories. Sodexo has already announced one of those small improvements. All units and departments may now use other vendors for any events under $200 — a small gesture that will help those of us who just want to treat students or recognize a colleague. AND you no longer have to fill out a form to ask permission!

The Parking Office now has a convenient online way to pay for parking — they are making life easier for all of us. And Facilities has agreed to eliminate chargebacks for routine tasks like hanging pictures.

I know you can probably come up with even more good ideas like these. Use our Fast Fix process to let us know your ideas.
One of my favorite T-shirts on campus says, “Keep calm and Blugold on.” That’s what we need to do this year. Keep our cool and do what Blugolds do: work together.

Blugolds, do you know how unique you are?

Other campuses would pick one major initiative to work on — like creating a one-stop shop for students or restructuring facilities. Instead, with help from the Rapid Action Task Forces, we came up with seven Big, Audacious Ideas and said “do them all.”

This fall I will invite you to participate in what will be important conversations around our equity, diversity and inclusiveness priorities. The provost will lead efforts to create an academic master plan to help us set priorities, focus our teaching resources where needed and identify opportunities to enhance our academic excellence.

Keeping our students front and center, we have already launched implementation teams, working with directors, to figure out how to unite our student services under a One-Stop Center. Last week a team came together to start defining an Advising and Student Success Center that will assist students in creating four-year plans, staying on track and connecting with faculty who can assist them with academic goals.

And, we have another team creating a new center to provide administrative support to campus. This will be critical to help us manage increased workloads due to reductions in administrative staff members. It will feel like we are taking on more work. But as the Administrative Support Center becomes operational, workloads will become more manageable.

We aren’t implementing these Big Ideas just because of budget cuts. I don’t know about you, but that wouldn’t be enough to get me out of bed in the morning.

We are making difficult changes, asking the impossible of each other — for our students.

Heather Kretz in Admissions shared with me an email from a parent whose daughter just finished her first year here. “We couldn’t be happier,” she wrote. Her daughter loves everything about UW-Eau Claire. She joined the Blugold Marching Band and she is thriving. Her younger sister is starting her college search, but as that mom wrote, “My guess is her decision is already made.” She’ll be a Blugold too. That student, and all the Blugolds to come, are why we must lock arms and keep our eyes firmly focused on the future.

At your places are cards with our Mission and Guideposts for the coming year. These should look familiar. They are why we are here.

We must not let the budget challenge divert us from what we know is most important: making sure that 100 percent of our Blugolds have a high-impact experience. We want every student to fall in love with this campus and stay with us — 90 percent coming back after their freshman year. We want to make it possible for at least half of our students to graduate in four years and we must grow students of color to at least 20 percent and help them close the opportunity gap.

These guideposts were worthy goals before the budget cut and they remain our priorities now, for future Blugolds and for those we will have in our classrooms and residence halls next week.

Two years ago at my inauguration I laid out three ideas foundational to our future:
First: We are here to serve and advocate for the public good. Our purpose is nothing less than transforming lives, no matter what the budget climate. I have been and will continue to be your loudest champion for the value of the liberal education this campus provides. I will take that message to Madison, to our legislators, to our business partners, to everyone who will listen. Even in the face of cuts, we will preserve our commitment to the creativity, critical insight, empathy and intellectual courage that defines us and sets us apart.

Second: We must act with audacity, especially when we feel beaten down. This year we needed audacious ideas — and Blugolds, you came through. We have a budget framework and we have the Big, Audacious Ideas to propel us forward. This coming year I will ask the University Planning Committee to lead us in using our four guideposts to develop a strategic vision and plan as we enter our next 100 years. We must keep looking forward.

And third: We want to find joy in our work. No, there is no joy in the budget we must implement. I do not mock the pain and hard work that this year will bring by a false call to “be happy.” But this year, let’s look deeper at what joy means for us. Helen Keller said that “joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow.” At the root of our joy is the fire we have for our students and the mission we collectively share. That purpose, that “holy fire,” will sustain and inspire us.

Let’s help each other keep that fire alive. We must dig down to the caring spirit that defines this university — that “kindfulness” that will help us be patient with each other during trying transitions.

Do I regret being here during this budget challenge? Not a bit. I am blessed to be part of this community, part of a university with a Big Future. That future starts now. Our challenge this year is to create the new UW-Eau Claire.

Yes, let us honor those not here. Let us acknowledge the frustration we feel about having to take on even more. But now, as the academic year begins, I need you with me, rolling up our sleeves to do what seems impossible. I need you all beside me, giving our best to the students who will walk through our doors next week. I need all of us to look forward, with hope, to the remarkable university we will continue to be.

UW-Eau Claire, do you know how unique you are? Let’s lead the way ... together.