Everywhere I go, people ask me what my hopes and dreams are for UW-Eau Claire. Sometimes they’re just being polite. Sometimes they’re trying to figure out what kind of a leader I will be. And sometimes that question really means “What are you going to change?” My answer is to hand people the mission card that’s on your tables. Please take it with you and keep it in your wallet as I do, or put it up on your computer. Because this mission has meaning only when we are each able to see ourselves in it, personally contributing to it.

You may recall that I talked about this mission when I spoke at my open forum as a candidate earlier this year. I told you then that I intended to make sure that everyone on campus had a copy of this mission card. Today is a first step in fulfilling that commitment.

I hand out these cards because your mission captures everything that attracted me to this university. It is a mission that has been preserved and advanced by my predecessors — from our first president, Harvey Schofield, in 1916 to Chancellor Larry Schnack, with whom I had coffee just last week, to chancellors Brian Levin-Stankevich and Gilles Bousquet, in whose footsteps I am honored to follow.

It reflects the calling that we have as educators. Thomas Jefferson said that an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people. Our mission to foster in one another the foundations for active citizenship is the bedrock to that high purpose.

This mission calls us to shared work. It requires all of us to come together to provide nothing less than an education that will change the world and change lives.

This is a mission that I know inspires you. To a person, every faculty member I have met in the past few weeks lights up when I ask about the students you teach. I see that same passion for students when I ask people at Davies or in the residence halls what’s important to them.
So no, I will not lead a multi-year study to revise our mission. This is our foundation and it will continue to guide me and guide us no matter what lies ahead. That is, I hope, both reassuring to you as well as a challenge.

You see, while we must continue to use this mission beacon to guide us, fulfilling it will not be easy. The very first day I was on campus, Vice Chancellor David Gessner came into my office to talk about the budget realities we now face: a two-year tuition freeze and a more than $3 million anticipated reduction in state funding over the next biennium. Welcome to UW-Eau Claire!

Don’t worry, Dave’s news did not for a minute cause me to ask myself, “Why did I say yes to this job?” Quite the opposite. These kinds of resource challenges are being faced across the country — we are not unique. This university community, however, is different. I am confident we have the people, the ideas and the commitment to our mission that will help us navigate these turbulent times.

Your commitment to your mission is emblazoned on your website and on the banners I saw when I did my first “secret shopper” incognito visit last November to this campus. “Excellence” — those banners say. “Excellence: Our measure, our motto, our goal.” That’s not just a slogan here. When I ask what defines a Blugold, invariably the first word I hear is “excellence.”

That means something to me, the fact that you care about a word that’s too often ignored. The writer Pearl S. Buck once wrote that “the secret of joy in work is contained in one word: excellence.” People who make excellence their benchmark do so because it brings joy to what we do. We may not always succeed in our striving for that elusive standard, but it inspires us, unites us, makes this a joyful journey.

So let’s not compromise on excellence, in all it means to us at this university. Let’s continue to aspire to academic excellence, certainly, and also to operational excellence, service excellence and excellence in how we support one another.

This morning I want to celebrate the excellence that I see on this campus — the pictures you saw on the screens as you ate breakfast underscored the countless examples of what we have already achieved here, despite the challenges and frustrations we’ve experienced this year. Students are translating their undergraduate research into prestigious internships with organizations like the Centers for Disease Control, and premiering documentaries in San Francisco. From a national hockey championship to a record fundraising year, excellence is practiced here.
But excellence is not just our legacy. As the great philosophers collectively known as Fleetwood Mac once admonished, “Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow.” What does future excellence look like for UW-Eau Claire? I’d like to propose four questions that will help us think more deeply about our future. The four questions are:

1. How can we build on excellence?
2. How can we grow excellence?
3. How can we redefine excellence?
4. And what if we shattered excellence?

Let’s take them in order. Look around this campus and you can see that building on excellence is not just an idea, it’s a literal transformation! A new Davies Center, new Centennial Hall — on budget and on time to open in the new year, the beautiful campus mall and transformed Little Niagara. We have planning for a new residence hall underway and are working on the redevelopment of Garfield Avenue. And we look forward to extraordinary partnerships with the Confluence Center and the Priory.

These changes are long overdue. In fact, I want to make sure we’re not only meeting the progress markers on our facilities master plan, but exceeding them. Let’s push our plan faster where we can — our students and community deserve no less.

The excitement our changing campus brings to our alumni, our community partners and to prospective students will also energize other “building” projects — building on our liberal education core, building on our strong UW-Eau Claire brand, building on international and multicultural immersion experiences for our students. We have a foundation of excellence; let’s build on that for our future.

But excellence isn’t just bricks and mortar or successful programs. It’s also the feel of this place. The culture we create. The stories we tell ourselves. Together we have the opportunity to grow excellence — to nurture and encourage excellence in each other and in the intangible things that keep us joyful in our mission.

But I know how challenging it can be to grow excellence in the middle of change. I’ve lived through eight different presidential transitions in my time, and I’ve heard the quiet chorus of cynics urging us to wait the change out. In the meantime, as we wait, our silos grow thicker and excellence erodes.
Let’s not wait to grow together into the university we want for ourselves and for our students. A university that’s inclusive. One that encourages every individual to thrive. We can grow excellence now.

I asked how we can redefine excellence. By that I don’t mean we throw out everything we’ve done and start over. I do mean we need to examine our mission with new eyes. We know, for example, what excellence means for our traditional undergraduate students. We have a rich curriculum and set of experiences from service learning to living-learning communities that define the Blugold undergraduate experience as truly extraordinary.

But what does excellence mean for nontraditional students? For the 50-year-old mother returning to school or the 25-year-old veteran transferring with 40 credits? What do they need that will be as equally — but uniquely — extraordinary for their Blugold degree? What does quality mean for all students from all backgrounds that we have the privilege to serve?

Do we welcome and engage our nontraditional students as wholeheartedly as we do our 18-year-olds? As a public institution that aspires to be the “premier learning community in the Upper Midwest,” we are entrusted with the responsibility to serve both our traditional students and also the growing number of women and men of all ages and backgrounds who seek a Blugold degree.

We also need to redefine excellence for all our work. I want to acknowledge the dedication of all of you in the face of five years of cuts, furloughs and frozen wages. I did not share in that sacrifice, although I, too, experienced it at my previous institution. It is a tribute to you that you have not only continued to serve but also to serve our students unreservedly.

It is my goal as your chancellor to do all I can to support the pay plan that will finally be implemented this coming year and to actively and creatively work to address our compensation inequities. That will include persistent communication with our legislators. But it also lies within our own power to take action. Can we redefine how we do our work so that we can more effectively serve our students and lighten our own workloads? I’ve heard a little bit about the “Eau Claire way” … and I think we have some potential to make a difference in that regard.

And finally — and perhaps a little dangerously — I’m asking us how we might shatter excellence. You know how exciting it is to watch a finely tuned Olympic athlete
shatter a long-established record. Or an innovator upend the world with an invention like the iPhone. Or a writer totally rearrange our understanding of the world with a line of poetry.

In the world of higher education today, we will need the spirit of reinvention, the will to shatter old habits and the vision to imagine what doesn’t yet exist. If you could shatter something that’s not working for you or your students right now, what would you do? If you could grab a learning or operational challenge and find a completely new solution, would you be willing to try? If you could go out on a limb for the sake of our mission, would you dare?

Our future together is going to require some shattering — along with lots of building, growing and redefining.

Fortunately, we already have in place the relationships and partnerships that can help us make our future happen. That interdependence — across campus and with our community — makes me powerfully hopeful.

I’ve found myself using that word — interdependence — quite a bit lately. I see interdependence as a relationship that enables independent people or organizations to adopt a shared goal while still maintaining their distinctive identities. That shared goal doesn’t diminish either partner, but makes possible outcomes neither could accomplish alone. Think about all that you are and have accomplished with the help of the relationships you have with your family, your partner, your best friend.

Just two weeks after I arrived, I attended a City Council meeting on our partnership for the Confluence project. I reminded the Council that the Confluence is an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate again the 100 years of interdependence between our city and the university. We can show our state what is possible when strong partners work together — on facilities projects, on job creation, on developing the talent that will assure quality of life for our region.

This breakfast is the perfect illustration of the multiple interdependencies that make this university great. Whether you are a student, faculty member, classified or academic staff member, an administrator, community partner, legislative representative, friend, alumnus or donor — we are all educators and all learners, united in “fostering in one another the hallmarks of a transformative liberal education,” as our mission states. You’ll hear me say this again: We are smarter together than by ourselves.

We are particularly interdependent with our students. At this university I see a mutual relationship with our students that not only distinguishes us but nurtures who we are.
I get my energy from students. When I walk this campus, I’m drawn to students. I love asking them what they’re interested in, why they’re here, what their dreams are. Don’t be surprised if I may be late for a few meetings because I couldn’t resist joining a campus tour for a few minutes on my way.

Interdependence extends beyond the campus as well to our UW System. We’re already partnering with other universities — in fact, we’re leading the System in this regard. This year our print shop will provide services for UW-Stout. We’re exploring ways in which we can share how we deliver other business services with Stout, River Falls, La Crosse and even Superior.

Interdependence is also a critical component in our relationships with this city and our region. Exactly 100 years ago the citizens of the city of Eau Claire were lobbying the legislature for a new normal school to be located right here. They were willing to donate 12 acres to make it a reality. Those efforts paid off, and three years later Schofield Hall opened its doors to the first class of the Eau Claire State Normal School.

Today, the university that grew from that not only contributes millions of dollars to Eau Claire’s economy every year, it enlivens our cultural life with talented musicians, … provides more than 400,000 hours of service to area non-profits, hospitals and schools, … and produces the talent that drives new businesses. Just last week I attended the ground-breaking for the new offices of the software company JAMF. What a university-community success story that is! JAMF founder Zach Halmstad is a 2004 music major who honed his computer skills working in LTS with Mac clients. Today, JAMF produces software exclusively for the Mac platform and has offices in New York, California, Amsterdam and Hong Kong. But the main office is right here, in Eau Claire, because Zach and his team want to hire UW-Eau Claire grads and they want to be in a community that benefits from everything this university offers.

At its roots, university/community interdependence must be linked to the academic mission of this institution, to the quality learning that defines us. Recently Jeff Vahlbusch, who directs our growing University Honors Program, shared with me conversations he is having with former Eau Claire city manager Mike Huggins.

They are “dreaming together” about ways that the Honors Program and its students can create more bridges with our community to solve real problems. They want to put both city and university on the national map as leaders in “active citizenship” — another one of our mission mandates.
The idea of interdependence is so compelling to me because it is foundational to our future. We can choose to struggle alone as individuals, departments or a university or we can actively choose to engage others in meeting the challenges that await. Frankly, I don’t think that’s much of a choice.

So for those of you who want to know what my priorities will be as your chancellor, they are simply these: Fullfill our mission by invigorating our commitment to excellence and growing our interdependent relationships.

So where do we start?

Some of you may expect that this is the part where I lay out the detailed Jim Schmidt plan for UW-Eau Claire. Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not going to do that today. I’ve seen leaders come and go, and every time it’s a brave new vision that takes a lot of our time and a lot of resources. I value you and your time too highly to do that here.

I intend to call this campus home for many years to come — you may have noticed I tend to stay at institutions for a long time, and I’m too old to change that habit now. We have time to do this right. We have time to create our future together.

So let’s start by getting to know one another. I want to know what’s important to you, where you find joy in your work. I want to know what excellence means to you and what we might want to redefine or shatter. I suspect you also want to get to know me better — what makes me tick.

So starting today and for the next few weeks, I’m going to post a different question on my chancellor homepage each week. One question. Take a few minutes and send me your perspective. Sign your name if you want to, but no pressure.

I’ll also put my own reflections on my webpage about my first weeks here. And I’ll be spending a lot of time walking this campus and getting to know you better.

That’s a start, but if we’re going to be working together on what’s important to us, we need to be very clear about what we expect from each other. Interdependence works best when it is founded on clear, mutually understood principles that we can all embrace.

One of the questions I’ll be asking in the coming weeks is how we expect to work together. What principles would you like us all to follow as a campus community? Maybe it’s the expectation of civility — in emails and conversation. Maybe it’s putting our students’ interests first. If we get those principles right — how we treat each other, our students, our community partners — setting our future goals will grow naturally.
In the coming months, we will talk together about those goals. And we will get very specific. What will help us build, grow, redefine or explode the excellence that reflects our mission? We’ll decide that together.

We’ve taken the first step this morning. Breaking bread together in many cultures signifies a commitment to each other. Our heritage is the practice of the Native Americans who gathered under the Council Oak on the banks of the Little Niagara to share meals and stories. Today, reflecting that centuries-old tradition, sitting around these tables with the Little Niagara still flowing outside, we acknowledge that we are a family of learners, interdependent with one another, sharing a mission to change lives this year.

I am so proud to call UW-Eau Claire my new home and to call you my colleagues. I am looking forward to all we will accomplish together. Thank you.