Good afternoon to members of the Commission and to Chair Amanda Burden. Having been through this process, we at Columbia know first-hand the essential forum this Commission provides for balancing competing interests to serve the greater good of our City, and we appreciate the opportunity to testify.

It is to be expected that I am here to re-assert that New York City’s great colleges and universities, including a resurgent CUNY system, are essential to the city’s creative spirit and intellectual excellence—components of the New York character that help make our city a world capital of knowledge and ideas. And also to state that strong universities stand out in the modern economy as exceptional sources of stable, moderate-income jobs for a diversity of New Yorkers.

That is all true, of course. More remarkable though is the degree to which New Yorkers now recognize this to be so. With Fordham’s expansion in Lincoln Center, multiple new buildings at CUNY schools, the selection of Cornell and Technion to build a new applied science campus on Roosevelt Island, the announcement earlier this week of New York University’s science facility in Brooklyn, and with work well underway on our own long-term campus plan in the old Manhattanville manufacturing zone, it is clear that what’s happening today on campuses across our City bodes well for New York’s future as a national and global center of higher education.

I have often said that a rich urban environment of thriving colleges and universities works to the benefit of all our institutions. NYU’s transformation over recent decades into a university of great distinction is not only an impressive story for NYU; it is a healthy thing for Columbia and our local peer institutions. The rising tide truly lifts us all.

The key point is this: Knowledge is an enterprise of accumulation. Each answered question leads to new questions demanding their own answers, making growth in the service of academic excellence an imperative for the modern research university.

Upon becoming Columbia’s president ten years ago, I noted that our University was severely constrained for space and that if college and university rankings were based on creativity per square foot, Columbia would far surpass everyone. I now amend that statement by noting that, using the calculus of square foot per student, NYU has an even tougher challenge than we do in the dense, urban environment of lower Manhattan.

While every institution based in New York City accepts the need to use the space available to us as efficiently as possible, there are limits. At a certain point, the scholarship, research, teaching, and public service at the heart of a university’s mission begin to suffer without the quality laboratories, classrooms, and living spaces needed to accomplish these goals—and so too does the institution’s value to the city and to society.

There’s no question that the growth of interdisciplinary academic partnerships underscores the value of locating faculty and students in close proximity to their colleagues and classmates in other disciplines. While we each must pursue our own unique paths forward, it is in the very nature of all great universities to be academic communities of shared scholarship and experiences, of living and working together. And for our colleagues at NYU that academic community is centered in Washington Square.

There are few people who can appreciate as deeply as I do the amount of energy and effort expended over recent years by President Sexton and his team as they have developed their proposals for NYU’s future. I know that this Commission has been studying and will continue to study the proposal before you carefully. And I urge you to give it your support.