I wrote in a recent letter to the campus community and Kentucky State University constituents and supporters on the potential impact to KSU of Governor Matt Bevin’s proposed 2016-2018 biennial budget and current fiscal year 2016 budget cut. Since that correspondence, we have had additional time to analyze in detail what the Governor has proposed. Though we understand what the Governor is trying to do, his budget efforts as proposed (to this date) will be detrimental to Kentucky State. It is not that we do not want to participate, cooperate and help advance the state, but we, KSU, do not have the resources available to meet the many current needs as we move forward to address correcting years of improper processes, procedures and in some instances, yes, negligence, as to duties and responsibilities. For the past 19 months, our work has focused on correcting many of those problems. But many remain.

The major remaining issue is enrollment. On entry I took the position that a student who enrolls and matriculates in the institution should pay his or her bill. This was not done to be harsh but was necessary because the University had $17 million in student receivables outstanding and the chances of recovering those funds were bleak. Taking that action impacted enrollment. Enrollment has also been affected by following and enforcing the University’s admissions standards. Those two things in combination have placed the University in the very precarious position the Governor’s budget poses if enacted. Kentucky State cannot withstand what is being proposed in the budget. If the budget as proposed is enacted, our options would be to declare financial exigency and/or prepare a closure plan. I do not like either one of those options and I am working hard to make certain we can do our work smarter, logically and effectively to ensure that Kentucky State University is here for another 130 years. (We are currently celebrating our 130th anniversary.) This will require a great deal of work by all of us and we must meet and be ready, willing and able to face and overcome the challenge. No one is declaring defeat. For while it is day, we must work to make KSU a premier institution.

Working to make KSU a premier institution is exactly what the Math and Sciences Division is doing. The Math and Science Division has been led by Dr. Fariba Bigdeli-Jahed for the last 12 years. When one reviews that division, how it operates, the issues that it addresses, the attention provided to students, tracking their graduates successes and achievements and helping their students get into professional school, and ensuring that their students graduate, there are good things happening. And because she has led this process and these programs to the success noted Fariba Bigdeli-Jahed is this letter’s GEM.
The instructors meet weekly to discuss content and teaching strategies. They try to minimize the lecture and maximize the student classwork, so there is a lot of student engagement,” she said. “When we see students who are not attending class, we will contact that student. The CAP advisors also will follow up with the students. We monitor attendance and assignments very closely.”

These procedures have made a profound effect with students at KSU both academically and emotionally, she said. Developmental courses used to cause delays in some students’ graduation because it would take one to three semesters before they could enroll in 100-level math and English classes. The lower-level courses also reduced the retention rate because the students had expected to participate in college-level studies. As a result, some of the students would become frustrated and discouraged and eventually leave the University, she explained.

The accelerated courses, however, have made considerable improvement with students’ academic performance, and Dr. Bigdeli-Jahed credits the mathematics department for its educational outcomes. The University’s model also is receiving high marks from the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and other institutions, she said.

“The success rate in accelerated college algebra was 82 percent in fall 2015. In the past, when we had the developmental courses, our college algebra success rate was around 50 percent or 56 percent. It was pretty low,” she explained. “CPE is using us as a success example. We have had calls from other universities and they’ve wanted to learn about our model.”

Dr. Bigdeli-Jahed emphasized that the English department’s faculty also has played an integral role in the model’s success.

“When you have a team of smart, committed, student-centered and hardworking faculty, you can do magic,” she said. “The real gems are the math and English faculty.”