

Optimism in a Changing and Challenging World

Rockford Chamber of Commerce

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by David L. Eisler, President
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Thank you. It is a pleasure to be with you tonight.

Wasn't it great to hear the Rockford Jazz Band? Sometimes I worry about music, art, and sports being left out of education today. Good teachers understand that every student is different. A well-rounded education helps students find hidden abilities, then nurtures and challenges them to make the most of those talents. As a young person, the clarinet opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed to me. In many ways, my musical training helped connect me with Ferris State University.

The first was as an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan when I played a concert there as a member of the Michigan Symphony Band. I remember this well because in rehearsal that day I inadvertently played in a rest and the legendary band director William D. Revelli made certain this was a day I wouldn't forget.

The next was during a preliminary presidential interview at the Grand Rapids airport. Toward the end of the session an emeriti professor asked me, "So why should a clarinet player be the president of Ferris?"

While this may seem a strange question, it was a fair one. Ferris doesn't offer a music major and search committees tend to look for someone with academic backgrounds in business, finance, or administration. The question provided the opportunity to talk about how a music director coordinates large groups of people, getting them to work together, to play in time and to sound as one. Even though some are featured soloists and others are accompanists, together they produce a professional, moving performance.

During my open campus interview session someone asked what my position was on athletics. I said that I played with the band, and that when it came to athletics I usually was the last person chosen. It allowed for a good laugh that helped break the ice and set the tone for our session.

When it comes to the well-rounded educational experience we hope to see in our entering students, the Rockford Schools stand out as a great example in providing the wide-range of opportunities young people need.

One of the reasons I'm delighted to be here is because of my respect and admiration for your superintendent, Mike Shibler, who does so much to maintain the high level of those opportunities. It's not just me who thinks this, either.

RHS has received an “A” from the Michigan Department of Education for the fourth year in a row, based on student achievement, educational opportunities and parent involvement.

During this year alone, RHS has nurtured six National Merit Scholarship semi-finalists

37 Rockford graduating seniors scored 30 or higher on the ACT.

We’ve already heard some of their musical excellence and they have some remarkable athletic accomplishments to go with them.

There are reasons for this. With his 20 years of commitment and experience, Dr. Shibley is a driving force for this excellence.

I think of Dr. Shibley’s long tenure when I consider that this is only my 6th year as president of Ferris, and yet this does make me 5th senior among Michigan university presidents. During this time I’ve worked with 35 Michigan university presidents or acting presidents who are no longer in the position.

The turnover among school superintendents is not much better, in fact, in some respects it may be worse. Why is that? Presidents and superintendents have to serve many different constituents. As Mike can tell you – you can’t make them all happy all the time and shouldn’t try. But it also helps to not make them all mad on the same day!

Compounding this are the challenging times in our state. This past year Michigan lost 113,000 jobs. Today unemployment is at a 16-year high – 9.6% and is predicted to average 11% for the next two years. Viewed from mid-2000 until the end of 2010 the state is predicted to have lost 674,000 jobs – 14.4% of the total workforce. Auto manufacturing jobs in Michigan could be just a third of what they were a decade earlier.

Besides unemployment, Michigan also leads the nation in outbound migration. 67.1% of Michigan residents involved in interstate moves are headed somewhere else, a greater than 2:1 ratio.

In higher education we feel the impact of these trends in multiple ways. Because of outward migration, we are now looking at a decade of dwindling numbers of high school graduates. With the continued economic decline we also see the negative impact on employment prospects for our graduates. With its focus on career success, Ferris has always enjoyed high placement rates. Surveys suggest that 98% of our students who want them find jobs. The reality for increasing numbers of our graduates is that those jobs may no longer be in Michigan. We also feel it in our budget.

In five years we’ve seen our University’s funding cut by \$8.7 million by the state. As stories emerge of a potential \$1.5 billion deficit in our state budget over this year and the next, I know more reductions are on the way.

Budget problems are exacerbated by a lack of a policy-based approach to higher education funding. Unlike K-12 education, each additional university student enrolled brings no increase in state funding to the institution they're attending. In a state where officials talk about the need for doubling the number of college graduates, this is an incomprehensible approach to funding. At Ferris, we seek to educate every prepared student who wants to study with us. Despite the lack of financial support from the state, we've become the fastest growing public university in Michigan. We believe this is what you our citizens should expect from higher education.

But the combined financial impact is staggering. In 2001 Ferris State University received nearly \$6,100 per student, eight years later we receive only \$4,300. For our current students this is \$33 million that our state has not invested in their education.

Despite repeatedly public pronouncements, higher education has not been a priority for our state. Michigan is one of only four states in the nation that spends more on corrections than it does on higher education. Over the past quarter century, the inmate population in Michigan prisons increased four-fold to a record 50,200 people. Consider this comparison, in Michigan this year we will pay \$31,000 to jail a criminal and \$4,300 to educate a college student at Ferris. Surely new policy-based approaches are needed here. But Einstein said it well, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

When most people think of higher education costs they focus on rising tuition. The actual educational cost for each student is a combination of state support and tuition. Since 2001, what would you guess has been our annualized cost increase per student at Ferris? 5%? 10%? more? Since 2001 our annualized cost increase has been just 2.1%, a half percent less than the rise of inflation during this period.

Despite all the challenges – and perhaps even because of them – I consider myself truly fortunate and blessed to be involved with higher education. I entered college in 1969 and 40 years later I'm still in higher education, because I believe it makes a difference. And that's why we should care that students have the opportunity of a college degree – because we as a society are being denied the skills and broader view of the world these people could offer. Woodbridge Ferris founded his school with a belief in a hands-on, career-oriented curriculum but he had a much broader view of education, which I believe is still relevant today. He said, "When I use the term education, I do not use it as an equivalent of schooling. Schooling at its best...has a tendency to make the acquisition of knowledge its chief objective. Education has to do with the enrichment of life."

The students I meet at Ferris are the best I have ever known precisely because, in the process of becoming enriched themselves, they are enriching others. Their concern for the less fortunate, even as they pursue academic excellence, truly amazes and astounds me. They inspire me and I want to share some of their stories with you.

Our student leaders are advocates for both the Ferris and local community. They annually lead our campus United Way drive and have received state-wide recognition for these efforts. With

their leadership our University more than met its United Way goals. When we received an urgent appeal from local food banks, whose supplies were not meeting the demands of our communities this past December, our students mobilized the entire campus community and collected over 7,000 pounds of food.

Students today are committed to helping the next generation. One young lady who graduated this past spring volunteered in a children's cancer ward in a Detroit area hospital after her freshman year. When she returned to campus in the fall she created our campus Make A Wish chapter that helps terminally ill children. She personally became someone who visits with children, learns their wishes and helps make them come true. This student first came to Ferris because she was drawn to our Pharmacy program. Because of the satisfaction she found in helping others, she switched her major where she would have more opportunity to help others in need. Her experience typifies that ideal of both learning particular skills, and using those skills for the enrichment of others. Without being in an educational environment that exposed her to those opportunities, I doubt she would today be in position to continue her passion for improving the lives of others.

One of my favorite stories about volunteer efforts is about The Ferris Idols, which was created by a group of students who were ostensibly preparing for entrance to pharmacy school. In reality they were getting together to watch American Idol. In time they decided to get off the couch and work together for the local Make a Wish chapter and Big Brothers and Big Sisters in Mecosta and Osceola County. One of these young ladies has not one, but two little sisters. When I asked why as a college student she had taken on this responsibility, she said nothing made her feel better or brought her more satisfaction than the time she spent with her little sisters.

Finally, some students enrich all of our lives by breaking the cycle of hopelessness that too many disadvantaged young people find themselves in. I think of one young woman who began her studies at Ferris in the fall of 1999 after graduating from Creston High School in Grand Rapids. At that time, she was not prepared for college, struggled academically and did not return for the fall of 2000. However, she did not want to be a drop out at a dead end job like so many people she saw around her, and was determined to improve her life. As a self-supporting student she returned to school, working at a campus dining facility and then for Ferris catering. This was where I met her, a young woman with a positive attitude and an engaging personality.

In 2006 she was forced to drop out of school, having run out of the finances to continue. Nonetheless, she continued working at Ferris catering, commuting from Grand Rapids to do so. As she remained in the University community she came to view this as her extended family. She describes it this way, "People encouraged me to finish what I had started and I didn't want to disappoint them." It was my honor to present her degree this past December, overcoming what for most would have been insurmountable obstacles and breaking this cycle of poverty.

This is what education is about and is why I am optimistic and excited about what lies ahead. I truly believe that education is our future and know that with the values and commitment of students today that we are headed in the right direction.

As a University President I know firsthand how good people like you are willing to dig deeply to make certain our students can afford the education that will help them become the future leaders of our state. I offer you and the Rockford Chamber my sincerest congratulations on the remarkable community you have created and fostered here in Rockford.

I'd like to leave you with a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes,

“[A] mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.”

Let us do what we can to assure that students now and in the future have no limits on the dimensions of their fullest development.

Thanks so very much. Best wishes to you all.