

Cleaning The River
Martin Luther King Faculty/Staff In-Service
January 21, 2008

Those of you who have heard me speak know my fondness for this quotation from H. Ross Perot, “The activist is not the one who says the river is dirty; the activist is the one who cleans the river.” Mr. Perot and I do not agree on much, but his words about activism ring true to me. Cleaning the river is a metaphor for taking constructive action.

I will speak plainly.

I want Ferris to be a truly diverse university, meaning a university where all people are welcome. We are not an institute; we are a university. We are not a Big Rapids university; we are a university located in Big Rapids and other cities. For too long we have been isolated, tucked away, sheltered from many of the cultural changes that occurred in the larger society. America is an increasingly pluralistic, diverse nation and Ferris should open its gates and arms to that diversity. Who could be opposed to us having students and teachers from Peru, Liberia, Norway, China, Egypt, Brazil, Taiwan, Kenya, and Italy? A truly diverse university has room for people that are straight, gay, bisexual, and transgender-ed; people who run fast and people who ride in iron chairs; people who are rich and privileged and people who barely have enough money to attend the University; people with crew cuts, people with dreadlocks, people with purple hair, people with no hair; people from Paris, Michigan and Paris, France; Whites, Yellows, Reds, Browns, Blacks and every shade; atheists, agnostics, deists, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Moslems, Wiccans, and others are welcome. Marxists can teach at a truly diverse University, and so can Evangelical Christians. By a truly diverse university, I mean a tapestry of colors, cultures, worldviews, lifestyles, and abilities all woven into its design.

The most important goal in the University Diversity Plan is the first one: *Create a University that is welcoming to diverse populations.* If Ferris is not a welcoming environment, then many people from diverse populations will not come here, and the ones who do come will be less likely to succeed here and more likely to leave. If we say we are welcoming but do not take actions that indicate a climate of inclusiveness our words are hollow. Let us make sure that International students are advised, befriended, and placed in jobs. Let us make sure that all buildings are accessible to people who cannot walk. Let us create an effective mechanism for handling concerns and disputes that are not covered by existing contracts. Let us reach out to all groups that have been marginalized at this institution and say to them, “There is a home for you at Ferris.” Let us work with the Big Rapids community to sensitize them to the needs of diverse populations. Cleaning the river means taking proactive action.

I will speak plainly. There are parts of this University where women and minorities do not feel welcome, and truth be told, may not be welcome. At a recent University-wide discussion, an African American student referred to Ferris as a “White school.” Dozens of Black students nodded in agreement. He did not mean a

predominantly White institution; he meant a university where peoples of color are too often viewed with disdain and suspicion. He meant that sometimes in classrooms teachers subtly and not-so-subtly mock and demean peoples of color. Having a PhD does not make one immune to prejudice; indeed, it often means that one can better rationalize one's prejudices. There are pockets of privilege here that approximate a "Good ol' boys network," where ethnocentrism and prejudice are normative and entrenched. We are a state university. We are not a White university; we are not a Christian university; and, we are not a straight university; those groups must be welcome here—and we should open our gates and arms to people who are not White, Christian, or straight. Our founder Woodbridge Ferris said, "My plea in Michigan—and it will be my plea to the last breath I draw, and the last word I speak—is education for all children, all men, and all women of Michigan, all the people in all our states all the time." In that one sentence Mr. Ferris used the word *all* six times.

Becoming a truly diverse university does not mean we ask every group to walk like, talk like, and act like the majority group; no, it means that we respect the worth of others, that we open our arms to them, that we give them every chance to succeed, that we replace the *they* with a *we*. Being a truly diverse university does not mean that you have to join NOW, vote for Obama, become an atheist, or march in a parade, but it does mean that you help create a university where *all* people believe that the university belongs to them as much as it belongs to any of us. And, it certainly means that we do not mistreat people.

Cleaning the river means making changes.

You cannot be the Chief Diversity Officer of an institution without believing that change is possible. Too often skepticism, cynicism, even fatalism, masquerade as objective critiques. I understand Ferris' history, the written and spoken histories; I understand the political, territorial, and personal battles, the divides that strain us, the hopes, fears, hubris, and past failures, the times that we, and I mean all of us, have ripped the guts out of this institution; yes, I know this history; I understand the obstacles, but I see something else: a university that is growing and maturing. There will always be people who resist change. That is life.

Go anywhere, anyplace, and the people you meet can tell you what is wrong with that place. This is especially true at universities. Go to Berkeley, Jackson State, Kent State, Georgetown, Oklahoma State, you name the university, students, faculty, staff, administrators there will tell you what is wrong with those places. Their critiques, often harsh, often correct, cannot and should not be discounted; however, the critiques rarely include the answer to a basic question: "What can I, the critiquer, do?"

Institutions change when individuals make the change. Change is not inevitable or possible without human intervention. Listen to these words about the neutrality of time from Dr. King:

"It is a strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either

destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

I ask you this day to become a part of the changes that are occurring at Ferris. When you see a Ferris video that does not include participants from diverse backgrounds raise your hand and say, “I think we can do it a different way.” Make sure that search committees are themselves diverse. Volunteer to serve on search committees to make sure that jobs are also advertised in publications that cater to diverse populations. And when minorities are identified make sure that they are treated fairly. Treat every co-worker and student with respect. Participate in workshops and colloquia that deal with diversity, but more than that, organize the workshops and colloquia. When you see people being victimized speak up, intervene. Invite colleagues from different backgrounds into your office, home, and life. Participate in the strategic planning process and make sure that diversity related issues are discussed. I guess what I am saying is this: do something. Creating a truly diverse institution is a job big enough for all of us.

In the past we lacked a plan and although our efforts were sometimes well-intentioned the results were not sustained. It was like throwing seeds on the ground without having tilled the soil. Read the University’s diversity plan. There is a copy on the table in the back. Offer criticism. Offer suggestions. A plan without action is printing ink as embalming fluid: dead words. Think of ways that you can help implement it. Remember it is a general plan. The real nuts-and-bolts work will occur in the divisional plans. To date, Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Administration and Finance have completed early drafts of their action plans. Ask to be included in the thinking that goes into those plans. Go to the meetings. Speak plainly. Ask to be involved in the implementation of those plans. Change is possible if you help.

I want Ferris to be a University where all views are heard, including the one that holds that diversity is a silly, sometimes devious, attempt to force liberal ideas on young, unsuspecting minds. I believe that view is wrong and not well-thought out but I don’t want to stifle it. I believe in the triumph of dialogue.

