

April 30, 2007

Dear Colleagues,

So we keep waiting
waiting on the world to change;
we keep on waiting
waiting on the world to change.

John Mayer, 2006

Ferris State University has had many presidents, but only one changed the organizational structure of the University by adding a Diversity Office. The Diversity Office will conceptualize, assess, nurture, and infuse diversity into the University's core. I thank President Eisler for creating the Diversity Office, and for entrusting me with the responsibility of leading the effort to make Ferris a truly diverse institution.

The four months that I have spent in this position have given me some insight into the enormity of the task. When my colleagues asked, "How is it going?" My stock answer has been, "The elephant is big." More than one of my colleagues responded, "Eat one bite at a time." That is sage advice. The goal should be to make meaningful, substantive changes that move the University—and some of those changes will be small, not easily discernible.

There is a Ferris that I want to help create—but truth be told—higher education communities do not change automatically or easily, and Ferris has more baggage than many institutions. One could make a strong argument that mistrust has become institutionalized at Ferris—and this is not a recent development. Too often opponents become enemies to be defeated. This penchant for "we-they" thinking makes constructive dialogues difficult, but not impossible.

Optimism is a new trait for me. As a sociologist, I was trained to view the world with pessimism and skepticism. A Chief Diversity Officer must be optimistic, must believe that problems can be identified and addressed. In my role as Chief Diversity Officer I will meet with any and all members of the Ferris community, and I will listen.

There is a Ferris that I envision. It is a place where people speak honestly and plainly. "I don't believe that will work because..." Or, "Let's start over and consider..." It is a place where dialogues, even painful discussions, are a part of everyday life; a place where every voice is heard, every poet, plumber, and philosopher. The skeptic in me screams, "Oh, you are so naïve. Have you not been paying attention these seventeen years?"

It is time to turn the page.

To the extent that I have any capital, I want to spend it building a truly diverse institution. I envision a Ferris populated by people from every state—from every continent. Imagine classrooms with white, black, brown, red, and yellow faces. Imagine these faces as students and teachers. In these classrooms teachers and students will learn the substantive

material of the courses and gain the wisdom that comes from building community. Yes, community.

I want to see a physical space for GLBT members of our community not because I believe in segregation but because I know that they are marginalized on this campus (and others) and need a place that is safe. That capital will be well-spent. I want to see regular Town Hall meetings where we discuss every hard topic—again, every voice heard. I want persons with disabilities to know that Ferris is a community that wants them, welcomes them, and needs them. I want to see a campus where all groups feel that the University belongs to them.

I want to see an institution where teachers, students, and staff do not tell jokes that belittle women, Arabs, gays, and others. I envision a Ferris that's a role model for the surrounding community, teaching lessons of tolerance and inclusion—teaching the lessons that we are learning. I want to help build a campus where students are not harassed because they share the racial background or ethnicity of someone who commits a crime.

In January I appointed a Diversity Planning Committee and began work on a comprehensive plan to guide the University's efforts to become a truly diverse institution. We placed the "evolving" plan on the Diversity Office's webpage: www.ferris.edu/diversity. Although the plan is still evolving, we have developed the plan enough to warrant the University moving forward.

I have asked the Vice Presidents to form Diversity/Implementation Committees to begin the work of placing the plan into action. By June 1, 2007, all divisions will have Diversity/Implementation Committees in place.

I have high expectations for these committees. Why? Because I have had dozens of people say to me, "We support what you are doing and want to know how to move forward." I know how long we have been waiting for an opportunity to make Ferris better, an opportunity to change the very fabric of a place that is in our hearts and that too often breaks our hearts. Optimism may be a new trait for me, but I know optimism without action is empty hope. Many of you have heard me reference H. Ross Perot's statement that the activist is not the person who declares that the river is dirty but is instead the person who cleans the river. The river I see cannot be cleaned by one person, or one committee. Making Ferris State University a campus that truly values diversity cannot be a job for one person or one committee; it will require the energies of many.

John Mayer sings, "Waiting on the world to change." And, of course, the world will not change itself. We must change it. We must change Ferris if we want it to truly represent its founder's vision that it would be a place that would make the world better. The work has begun. I have no doubt we are moving forward.

David Pilgrim,
Chief Diversity Officer