

Notes to Board of Trustees
February 22, 2019

Woodbridge Ferris was a gifted orator who spoke before hundreds of audiences. His style was the “heart to heart talk” with a telling of his personal experiences and a “philosophy expounded which had grown out of these experiences.”¹ His most popular speech was called “Making the World Better.”² For many years that simple phrase served as the official (later as the unofficial) mission of the University that he founded. Although the particulars of the talk varied depending on the setting, the main themes remained: avoid selfishness, do not oppress others, and help all who are willing to help themselves. Here is an excerpt from that speech, delivered in 1910.

“Get all the knowledge you can, but use your knowledge in the right way and it will be of untold benefit to you. Don’t use it in oppressing others... And when you see a man or woman trying to rise and doing the right thing don’t be selfish but try to help that person rise.”³

It would not bother me to see that quote plastered on the walls in every building on campus. After all, Woodbridge built this institution to help others rise. He gave students the support they needed. In 1928, while discussing Woodbridge’s life and death, the *Daily Times* wrote,

“Nobody ever had to worry about the wherewithal for tuition fees at Ferris Institute, which specialized in training pharmacists. If young men or women looked promising, Ferris had a habit of letting them give notes for their college expenses and redeem them any time in the future when they were in business for themselves and could pay them without difficulty. In his private safe at Big Rapids, Ferris always had on hand a stack of promissory notes from former students, and was fond of telling that mighty few of them ever went to protest.”⁴

¹ This was a description of Woodbridge Ferris’s style as reported in a local newspaper. “Local University Closes Another Successful Year,” *Valparaiso Porter County Vidette* (Valparaiso, Indiana), August 22, 1917, 7.

² “The Ferris Lecture,” *Times Herald* (Port Huron, Michigan), March 13, 1907, 6.

³ “Class Completes W.B.C. Studies,” *The Courier* (Waterloo, Iowa), February 25, 1910, 7. This newspaper article gives excerpts from Woodbridge Ferris’s speech. There is also a favorable critique of the speech.

⁴ *The Daily Times* (Davenport, Iowa), March 28, 1928, 3.

Woodbridge cared deeply about students long before words like *student-centered* were fashionable. He was drawn to students like Russell A. Dixon, one of the African American students who came here from Hampton Institute in the early 1900s. Woodbridge “took a personal interest in this ambitious young man” and advised Dixon to continue his education at Northwestern University. In 1933, Dixon became the first African American to earn an advanced degree in dentistry from Northwestern. He spent 37 years as the dean of the Howard University School of Dentistry—educating one-half of all the black dentists practicing at that time. Today, dental students at Howard University study in the Russell Alexander Dixon School of Dentistry Building. Trees have branches, and Dixon was one of the branches on the Woodbridge Ferris tree.

We should be proud that our founder mentored students—invited them to his home, personal library, dinner table. Woodbridge was a leader worth following. We should be proud that the Institute which bears his name had women in the first classes, International students before 1900, and black students in the first decade of the 20th century. He also invited speakers to lecture to the student body about disabilities. Making the world better was a part of his legacy. We must never forget that we did not create this university; we inherited it—and we inherited powerful examples of diversity and inclusion.

Our founder died on March 23, 1928, two months after visiting Hampton. Six military companies and the 126th infantry band marched in the funeral procession to Highland View Cemetery in Big Rapids, where Woodbridge and Helen Ferris are both interred. Reverend Alfred W. Wishart preached the eulogy. He said of Woodbridge:

“He was a bold, aggressive champion of high ideals. His influence was that of all true men who uphold real values and contend for righteousness and justice. A multitude of men and women scattered over this country are with us in thought today. To them Senator Ferris was the guide and example of their youth. In time of moral or material need he was their friendly counselor and benefactor. When life was hard for them he helped them solve their

problems. To invest one's influence in the lives of struggling youth is glorious living, and gloriously did our friend live.”⁵

More than ninety years later, we remain committed to educating the sons and daughters of Michigan, embracing the “glorious living” that comes from investing in youth. And, this investment has meant to focus our attention on creating an environment where every student believes that the university belongs to them as much as it belongs to others.

One would be hard-pressed to find a Midwestern institution our size that offers more diversity and inclusion related programming—including ethnic celebrations, sensitivity training, and campus-wide discussions on tough topics like racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. We have implemented initiatives to make the campus more welcoming to military veterans, people from the working class, older people, and LGBTQ members. An increasing number of faculty have redesigned their courses to infuse diversity and inclusion related pedagogy. Of these things, we are proud. We have taken steps to help students who struggle financially. We are committed to ensuring the success of our students, including those who have food and housing insecurity. This work is consistent with our core values.

We have challenges: a continuing decline in student enrollment, including International students, persistent achievement gaps, and a workforce that is not as diverse as most of our sister institutions—and, occasionally, incidents of incivility. We will continue to address these and other challenges, and we will make progress. Confronting challenges—and finding sustained excellence on the other side of those challenges—is also a part of Woodbridge's legacy. And, like Woodbridge, we will continue to help others rise.

⁵ “Prophet of Virtues,” *News-Palladium* (Benton Harbor, Michigan), March 27, 1928, p.8.