

# President's Memorandum to Faculty and Staff

Office of the President  
November 29, 2006

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With conclusion of the Thanksgiving holiday, the end of fall semester is rapidly approaching. It is easy to feel the faster pace on campus as end of term assignments are due and the number of campus events increase. I want to take this opportunity to share thoughts with you on how our University will respond to the recently approved Michigan Civil Rights Initiative and some of the work I have been doing off-campus with alumni and donors.

## **Diversity, Affirmative Action, and Ferris**

Diversity is an important and essential part of Ferris State University. As an educational institution, we work to prepare students for a world that is global, multi-ethnic and rapidly changing. To provide the educational experiences students need for success, our campus must be an environment that goes beyond tolerance and understanding, it needs to be recognized as a place that fosters, promotes, and celebrates diversity.

From our very beginning, we have been a school created to provide opportunity to all students, some of whom might not otherwise receive the benefit of a higher education. Woodbridge Ferris' first class at the Big Rapids Industrial School consisted of ten men and five women. To my knowledge, our first African American student was Gideon E. Smith, who attended the Ferris Institute between 1910 and 1912. In 1961 Mr. Smith returned to campus to receive both our Distinguished Alumnus Award and the Golden Eagle Award as a 50-year graduate.

Throughout the years Ferris has welcomed and helped a diverse group of students succeed both in college and in life. Talking with these graduates, it is easy to hear how our education changed their lives. However, beyond these numerous examples of success, there remains much work to be done – both to attract, retain, and graduate a diverse student body and to create a workforce that reflects the diversity in our state.

Earlier this month, our efforts for diversity received what could be a significant additional challenge. On Election Day, voters approved the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, which bans affirmative action in college admissions, state hiring, and state contracting policies. This ballot initiative will take effect in less than a month, on December 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The immediate impact of this action on our University is unclear, as Ferris does not practice the preferred admission actions prohibited by this initiative. However,

questions remain on how far this may extend beyond admissions. It is equally unclear at this writing how the initiative will interact with federal affirmative action processes. Beyond legal aspects there is no denying the unease and uncertainty that the approval of this initiative has created in higher education communities across the state.

About a decade ago California approved a similar measure, Proposition 209. There is evidence of the negative impact this ban has created at some institutions in California. While a number of examples exist of this, the one most often cited is the significant decline in the admission of African American students at UCLA. While transfer numbers remain strong, there has been a 57% decline in African American freshman admissions since the enactment of Proposition 209. The circumstances are different at Ferris than at UCLA, but it is clear to me that there will never be a more important time for our University to reaffirm and to strengthen its commitment to diversity.

Today I am pleased to announce the creation of a new position at Ferris State University, that of Chief Diversity Officer. This position will provide full-time release for a member of our faculty or staff who will lead our efforts for diversity and report directly to the President. Initially this will be a renewable one-year internal appointment. The person selected as Chief Diversity Officer will provide strategic organizational leadership and focus for our institution's diversity efforts. Included in these are the following -

- Lead and develop our institutional response to the changing educational landscape created by the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative
- Increase our efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate a diverse student body
- Develop and build upon current efforts to recruit and retain a diverse workforce
- Work collaboratively with all university constituents to develop an institution-wide diversity plan.

It is my intent that we will focus on how to create more diversity at Ferris State University. If you are a person who feels passionately about these issues and is looking for a special challenge that can make a lasting difference for our University, I want to encourage you to apply. Application information is available from our office at ext. 2500 and the deadline of applications is Wednesday, December 13<sup>th</sup>. It is my desire that this person be ready to begin work as Chief Diversity Officer beginning in January 2007.

Additionally I am looking for volunteers willing to assist me on a search and screening committee to help review applications and interview the finalists. Members of this search committee will need to have an open mind for all potential applicants and be available to work between December 14<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. If you are willing to serve on this committee please send me an email indicating your desire to do so at [eislerd@ferris.edu](mailto:eislerd@ferris.edu).

### **Ferris Foundation Gala**

In early November the Ferris Foundation hosted the most successful gala in its history. A record attendance of 476 people helped raise funds for student scholarships and

faculty\staff awards. During the evening we heard about the difference this scholarship support makes for Lynda Canham, a medical records technology student. Technology faculty member Dan Skurski shared his work with Ferris Formula I and Mini-Baja student projects, efforts supported by the Foundation's Exceptional Merit Grants program.

A special part of the evening was a tribute to President Robert Ewigleben for his leadership and service to the University. This was a touching moment as all of Dr. Ewigleben's family was in attendance and the evening's audience greeted his remarks with a standing ovation. The evening closed with a program by our guest James Earl Jones. He shared stories and reminisces from a life with extraordinary accomplishments in the face of significant obstacles. These were comments that were both touching and inspirational. The comments I received from those in attendance were that this was our most successful gala ever and best of all, in support of a wonderful cause. During its history, the Ferris Foundation Gala has generated over \$200,000 in support for scholarships and exceptional merit grants.

On the same day as the Foundation Gala, I invited a group of 75 alumni, supporters, and donors to share their experiences and observations about Ferris with me. I asked them from their unique external perspective to provide their opinions on future prospects for higher education. This was a unique opportunity for me to reconnect with some very special alumni and to encourage their involvement with ongoing efforts for our University. One of the exercises I did with this group was to ask them to answer the same questions I posed to you during my first year at Ferris State University -

- What three things do you cherish most about Ferris State University and would least like to lose?
- What are the three biggest challenges facing Ferris State University?
- If you were President of Ferris State University what would be the three most important things for you to do?

It was interesting for me to hear how closely their responses reflected what I learned from my conversations with you. Here's a summary of responses to the first question about what they cherished from their Ferris experience -

- **Programs** - Ferris State University offers educational programs of high quality, that are in many cases practical and technical. These programs produce graduates who are career-ready.
- **Mission and Values** - Ferris provides students opportunity, the opportunity to succeed, and access to higher education in an environment that values diversity and character development.
- **People** - One of the treasured assets of Ferris State University is its people -
  - Faculty and staff who are dedicated and committed to student success.
  - Students who are diverse and engaged.
  - Graduates who are successful and still connected to friendships formed during college.

- Supportive relationships that extend beyond the campus to include the community.
- **Campus** - The small town atmosphere of Big Rapids, the size of the campus, and an atmosphere that promotes interaction between faculty and students are recognized strengths of Ferris State University.

This input is very important to me in understanding how our University and its efforts are perceived and regarded by our alumni and those external to the University. I look forward to sharing more of this feedback with you as the data are analyzed.

### **Holiday Gathering**

Thursday, December 7<sup>th</sup> is the date for the annual Ferris State University Employee Holiday Reception. Vice Presidents Dan Burcham, Rick Duffett, Michael Harris, and General Counsel Miles Postema join me in inviting each of you to join us between 1:30 and 3:00 pm next Thursday at the Holiday Inn. I am hopeful that you will be able to take a few moments from your schedule to celebrate the end of the semester and this holiday season. We look forward to seeing and visiting with you.

Best wishes,

Dave Eisler