

President's Memorandum to Faculty and Staff

Office of the President
December 2, 2011

HLC Team Draft Report

At long last the draft team report from the Higher Learning Commission's visit last April is available to us. The delay in receiving the report resulted from some extraordinary circumstances with the team and rapidly changing circumstances at the HLC. Normally the report is not released until it has been finalized. However, given the time that has elapsed I believe it should be distributed now, with the understanding it may change in the weeks ahead.

The report is in two sections, Assurance and Advancement. The main body of this is the Assurance section, which is the accreditation portion. The Advancement section included with the team's report is provided to the University as advice to consider, and is not an official part of the accreditation decision. Most importantly, the Assurance section finds that the University has met all accreditation requirements and summarizes the review as follows:

*"The review of the self-study report, campus documents, and facilities together with interviews and discussion with key people at Ferris State University provide evidence that all requirements and criteria for accreditation have been met. FSU has adequately addressed previously identified challenges. There is broad institutional commitment to FSU's distinctive educational mission focused on career oriented education. The work of the Strategic Planning and Resources Council builds for the future based on the founding principles of FSU and involves input from many FSU stakeholders. The dedication and passion about broad based, career focused, professional technical education at the institution demonstrated by its constituent groups are a strong foundation for Ferris as it moves toward the future. While the Team did find areas that will require continued attention from FSU; its faculty, staff, and students demonstrated that they are open to working toward continuous improvement at the institution. After reflecting on the evidence, **the team is comfortable recommending continued accreditation with a ten-year period before the next Comprehensive Visit.**"*

There is much praise and many, many positive comments throughout the entire document including

- Recognizing the comprehensive nature of the self-study and the inclusive nature of the process - *"...the self study reflects the common focus of FSU on professional, technical, and applied education using an institutional perspective."*
- Congratulating faculty, staff, and the Ferris board for their shared understanding of mission- *"A significant practice at Ferris State University is its continuing commitment to its unique mission which is focused on applied, career focused education for its students. This commitment to its unique mission permeates across the institution and is shared by all of its constituent groups... Just as important, it is widely recognized and embraced by faculty and staff across the institution. The various efforts at planning that the institution undertakes are clearly aligned with that mission."*

- Speaking frequently of the institution's commitment to diversity – *“One example of Ferris State's governance and administrative structures that promote effective leadership and collaborative processes is found in its institutional commitment to diversity. The institution has demonstrated a strong commitment to diversity and social responsibility in the appointment of a vice president in support of diversity as well as a variety of other programs and activities. The concept of diversity and inclusion is evidenced across the university and is interpreted broadly, including cultures, gender and gender orientation, religion, disabilities, beliefs and ideas.”*
- Noting that every group interviewed was familiar with the University's history – *“Indeed, the institution has clearly continued to respect the values and emphases established by its founder who planted ‘an expectation for service to one's community.’ The university is to be applauded for keeping W.N. Ferris' vision for the institution vibrant and for connecting engagement and service in meaningful ways to the curriculum and co-curricular programming... That the university has been able to sustain and even build on W.N. Ferris' vision of an engaged institution during difficult financial times is testament to how strongly held the concepts of service and engagement are at Ferris State University.”*
- Recognizing our commitment to preparing students for careers in the global economy – *“This commitment to preparing students for careers in a global economy is evident in the university's written materials, self-study, planning documents and reflected in institutional strategic directions.”*

Some of the other areas of strength recognized in the report include

- Approach to Learning – *“As a career university, Ferris is at the forefront of applied learning, including the establishment of a co-curricular transcript (OrgSync) and E- portfolio which complement the university transcript. The majority of Ferris State University degree programs require at least one internship where students learn through their experiences in real world environments.”*
- Curriculum – *“Evidence from interviews... self study documentation, and meeting with advisory councils suggests the institution has a strong commitment to keeping the curriculum current and relevant.”*
- Finances – *“The audited financial statements of Ferris State University make it clear that the institution is on solid financial ground.”*
- Facilities – *“The physical facilities that house the special purpose laboratories and clinics provide state of the art learning experiences for many Ferris State University students... In addition, the University designates substantial portions of its unrestricted net assets for maintenance and replacement of its physical facilities, thereby limiting the scope of the deferred maintenance which plagues so many other colleges and universities across the country.”*
- Instructional Improvement – *“The offerings and participation in the Ferris State University Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning suggests an ongoing commitment by the institution to creativity and practice in the classroom and improvement of instruction.”*

- Library – *“...the Ferris Library for Information, Technology, and Education (FLITE) physical space provides a distinctive gateway to the campus. The Team found FLITE’s focus to be on creating virtual ‘learning environments’ and to supporting effective use of technology in learning, evidence of what could become the 21st Century library.”*
- Planning Processes – *“Ferris State University demonstrates that its planning processes are congruent with the larger institutional mission, realistic without precluding the launching of strategically important initiatives, and appropriately careful about and sensitive to the demands emanating from a turbulent larger environment. The Strategic Planning and Resource Council (SPARC) whose members include administrators, faculty, and staff, has combined responsibilities linking strategic planning and recommendations on resource allocation. SPARC is functioning effectively and members speak highly of the collaboration among all concerned.”*
- Program Review – *“Evidence gathered from interviews and self study documentation suggests the institution has committed to a very active program review process which is clearly utilized in the budget, planning and curriculum review process.”*
- Region – *“...the Big Rapids community (and beyond) finds tremendous value in the university and its various components... There are ongoing programs that educate FSU students on social responsibility and the value of community outreach. There is clear evidence, provided by local city officials, K-12 administrators, and local business people that... [they] are aware of the value FSU brings to the region, a value that appears to far exceed the economic impact made by the university.”*
- Student Recruitment – *“The University has not hesitated to undertake special initiatives to sustain and expand its base of enrolled students (and the tuition revenue they provide).”*
- Support for Learning – *“Across campus Ferris State University supports and maintains an elaborate array of additional laboratory and support resources to facilitate student learning. Ferris State University provides significant financial and facility support for learning resources. It was clear from open and targeted meetings that many non-classroom employees are well informed and value and take student learning at FSU seriously. Employees are industrious about learning what is happening across the university and make their voices heard.”*
- Support for Students – *“Evidence of institutional resiliency is evidenced by FSU meeting the challenges of students where they are and taking them where they need to go academically and personally. Ferris State University students profit from a wide range of non-classroom activities, learning support services, and personal advising.”*

Areas of Concern`

As in any accreditation report there are areas of concern. Before you read this section I want to stress that these are opinions of the Visiting Team. They are not facts. It is important to remember that the recommendation of the Team is that the University meets all accreditation requirements.

Some of the areas of concern include:

- *Assessment – “There is no lack at Ferris State University of data collection for the ongoing evaluation and assessment of various university offices, programs, and activities. However, the individual programs had a wide degree of variability; some programs had nothing more than a few learner outcomes with no associated data, analysis or evidence of planning. The institution clearly needs to address this inconsistency in assessment across academic programs. If there is a concern to be expressed in this regard, it is one involving ‘closing the loop’, insuring that assessment results are used to inform decisions and drive appropriate responses. Team members hope that programs will be able to learn from each other and develop more strategic use of assessment tools to review and revise programs, courses, course sequences and instructional techniques.”*
- *Faculty Scholarship – “Ferris State University should self-evaluate the campus climate for promoting scholarship... Whether faculty are engaged in applied or basic research or whether they participate in the scholarship of teaching or of service, more FSU faculty should be encouraged to participate and contribute to their disciplines and the dissemination of knowledge... The lack of evidence of this type of information in the Ferris State University self study is itself data about how the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of intellectual inquiry are viewed at FSU. Ferris State University needs to address the role of research and scholarship at the institution.”*
- *General Education Revision – “Like many institutions today, Ferris State University is redesigning its general education curriculum using a ‘single event process’. To avoid the pitfalls of a ‘single event process’ the Team recommends that the institution consider a general education process that is ongoing, actively managed and allows for modification on a continuous basis. In this approach currency and responsiveness can be more quickly addressed and turf battles can be minimized. The function of the General Education Committee could be easily changed to create this more continuous approach to management of the process.”*
- *Graduate Education – “As FSU develops and expands its graduate education offerings in the future, it is important to pay attention to and focus on graduate education at FSU. The Team recommends that Ferris State University engage in careful examination and planning for all of the issues that are part of graduate education... There is little evidence at FSU of an organizational commitment to create an effective graduate learning environment...Through analysis of institutional documentation and interviews with faculty and staff, the Team was not able to conclude that Ferris State University demonstrated that the culture of scholarship is consistently present on campus; such a culture is necessary to support an expansion of current graduate education.”*
- *Instructional Technology – “Ferris State University does not have a strategic plan for instructional technology. The development of such a plan was given to a campus wide committee which has not yet issued a draft.”*
- *Kendall College of Art and Design – “Currently, Kendall College of Art and Design and FSU still operate autonomously in many of the same ways that the previous Team, this Team and others have found confusing. They have separate faculty unions. While most of the non-faculty staff at FSU belong to unions, the non-faculty staff at Kendall do not. The governance processes of the*

two institutions, including the Kendall College Senate and the FSU Academic Senate, are separate and independent. The curriculum review processes operate separately and independently through the Kendall College Senate and the FSU Academic Senate. They each have their own general education requirements.”

“It is the recommendation of the Team that Ferris State University submit a progress report to the Higher Learning Commission which will address the continued integration of Kendall College of Art and Design and Ferris State University. The report should address how three major functional areas 1) curriculum and academic requirements for students, 2) personnel policies for faculty and staff, and 3) budgeting and financial processes are integrated at the Kendall and Ferris State University campuses. The progress report should also provide evidence of how Ferris State University communicates the role of Kendall College as a College of Ferris State University with the public and with students, faculty, and staff on both campuses.”

- Resource Base for Technology Infrastructure – *“The concern here is whether the growing demand for capacity and support will outrun existing resource deployments”*

Concluding Comments

There is much in this report that we can look to with pride and satisfaction, recognition for strong commitment, hard work and dedication to build a great institution. There are also questions that raise concern and thoughtful reflection.

We have invested considerable time and effort in this process, but this is directed at more than meeting the standards of the Higher Learning Commission. The HLC standards are, after all, only minimums. The point has been to use this external review of our institution as an opportunity to see how we can continue to improve, to provide a better education to our students, to become a better place to work and grow, and to be a more effective resource for our communities.

I would encourage you to read this report carefully and discuss the observations and opinions expressed within it. It is likely that you will disagree, perhaps strongly, with some comments and sections of this report. I know I do. The exercise at this point is not to take this report verbatim and place each comment on an institutional to-do list. Instead, we should now balance the suggestions of this report against our own knowledge, experience and understanding of our University. From this, working together, we will identify areas where we should focus and build on the advice provided us.

During the first two weeks of the spring semester we will schedule open forums in Big Rapids and at Kendall to hear your thoughts, analysis and reactions. I invite the self-study chairs to join me in a discussion of this report with you.

Candidly, the inclusion of a progress report on the relationship between Ferris and Kendall was both a surprise and disappointment. To address this concern I am appointing a working group including Provost Fritz Erickson, Kendall President Oliver Evans, Academic Senate chair Doug Haneline and Kendall Senate chair Cindy Todd. Their charge is to review this relationship and any questions that may remain regarding the merger. They are empowered to add others to their

group as may be useful in their work. It is my desire they complete their study and report back to me their observations, recommendations, and suggestions before the end of spring semester. At that time I will share their report with you.

This Higher Learning Commission self study is a process that we began back in the fall of 2007. It has required concerted effort by many across our campuses. In sharing this report with you I want to thank all the members of our University that contributed to this accreditation effort:

- Steering committee chairs Mike Cairns, Michael Cooper and Chris Vonder Haar
- Self-study editor Sandy Balkema
- Criterion committee chairs Paul Blake, Julia Rodriquez Burke, Cheryl Cluchey, Steve Durst, Abdi Ferdowski, Doug Haneline, Jennifer Hegenauer, Mike Hughes, Melinda Isler, Ron McKean, Kitty Manley, Carol Quigley, Kristin Salomonson, Wendy Samuels, Caroline Stern and Leroy Wright
- Steering committee members Jeff Boochard, Rick Christner, Rick Griffin, Oliver Evans, Michelle Johnston, Tom Oldfield, Max Shangle, Sueann Walz and Glenn Zobel
- Criterion committee members
- Self-study coordinators Mo Milzarski and Robbie Teahen
- The many, many faculty members, staff, students, and members of our Board of Trustees who contributed to the report, prepared materials, or interacted with the team when they were on campus

In the weeks and months ahead I look forward to the opportunity of engaging with you in this study and reflection. Most of all I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone on our campuses who made this outcome possible through your service on committees, your production of data and the everyday work you do to make this one of the nation's greatest universities. You will find a copy of the report at <http://www.ferris.edu/fsuintranet/hlcvisit.pdf>.

This report demonstrates clearly and unequivocally the extraordinary growth and progress of Ferris State University. It results from the efforts of each of us and is something of which we should be extraordinarily proud.

Thank you so very much for helping to make Ferris State University a truly extraordinary university.

Sincerely,

David L. Eisler, president