

President's Memorandum to Faculty and Staff

Office of the President
November 2, 2015

President Bellavance Inauguration

This coming Thursday, Nov. 5, Leslie Bellavance will be inaugurated as the 13th President of the Kendall College of Art and Design. This is a very special day both for Leslie and for Kendall. As such it provides an opportunity to reflect on the great progress the college has made and to consider exciting prospects for the future.

The inaugural events are a celebration of the central role that Kendall plays in the cultural life of west Michigan. This role was featured prominently this fall in KCAD's contributions to ArtPrize, Grand Rapids' hugely popular city-wide art competition – especially with Leslie, the college and its alumni playing major roles in juror awards. One can see the engagement of Kendall and its people in many different ways, its exhibition schedule, its leadership efforts in art education and design, and in the cultural and educational anchor it has become for downtown Grand Rapids.

This inauguration is a reminder of how much Kendall has grown since its merger with Ferris in the 2000-01 academic year. During that time there has been the development and addition of a significant number of new programs and degrees, and student enrollment has more than doubled. Beginning with the combining of two buildings at its current location on Fountain Street, continuing with the addition of the former Federal Court House and Post Office, and most recently with the merger of the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, the physical campus has grown significantly. Truly, this has been an unprecedented period of growth and development.

We are very fortunate to have Leslie Bellavance as the President of Kendall College of Art and Design. She is a working artist with many years of experience in higher education, and brings a unique mix of artistic and administrative skills to her leadership of Kendall. I am especially pleased the inaugural celebration includes a special exhibition of her artwork inside the Woodbridge N. Ferris Building. The exhibition will run through December 5th.

This is a very exciting time for Kendall, and it is wonderful to have President Bellavance's experience and perspective as the college continues to play a pivotal role in the art and design community not just in west Michigan, but nationally and internationally. I encourage you to join me in congratulating Leslie Bellavance, and the Kendall College of Art and Design's faculty, staff, students and alumni on this special occasion. A full schedule of inaugural events with times and locations is available at www.kcad.edu/inauguration/.

Higher Education Act

Last week I had the opportunity to take part in a ceremony celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Higher Education Act as part of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' annual meeting. This commemoration of the HEA Act of 1965 took place at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, where the act was first signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson.

As a part of Johnson's "Great Society" program, the HEA was designed to expand access to higher education, especially for those traditionally unable to afford a college degree.

Education was a subject President Johnson cared about deeply. Johnson, a 1930 graduate of TSU (then called Southwest Texas State Teachers College), was sensitized to the plight of poor children, especially Hispanics, when he spent several months during his junior year teaching at a segregated school in Cotulla, Texas. The HEA was sweeping legislation that through its subsequent re-authorizations led to programs that provide the access and financial support our students enjoy today.

Title IX came about through reauthorization of the HEA in 1972, the same year that Title IV established Pell Grants, originally called Basic Educational Opportunity Grants and later renamed for Sen. Claiborne Pell. Pell Grants have had a major impact on American higher education and our university. At Ferris in the 2014-15 academic year, 5,451 students, 43.2 percent of our student body, received Pell Grants. Nationally, over eight million students receive Pell Grants. The number of students who have attended college and earned their degrees through Pell Grant support is a remarkable figure.

The anniversary event included a panel of former Secretaries of Education, as well as remarks from Luci Baines Johnson, the president's younger daughter. She recalled that when asked which of his papers should first be displayed at his presidential library, President Johnson said the papers that led to the passage of the HEA, ahead even of those for his signature civil rights legislation.

Today we are struggling with this same issue of affordability the HEA was designed to address. The 50th anniversary of the HEA's signing, which is officially Nov. 8, offers us an opportunity to appreciate this piece of historic legislation. The HEA offered new opportunities for advancement to people who had been shut out due to limited access to education. At Ferris we are committed to keeping that access available and affordable.

Student Debt

The growing problem of student debt has attracted several news stories in the past week with the publication of the Institute for College Access and Success's, *Student Debt and the Class of 2014*. There is good news for Ferris in this report as I shared in a recent budget forum. We have made significant progress on the challenge of student debt. For students who began as freshmen at Ferris and graduated during 2013-14 with debt, this amount declined by an average of \$1,600 from the previous year. Ferris had been the Michigan public university with the highest average amount for this figure. This is no longer the case, as we are now second-highest behind Michigan Tech.

However, there is still much work to be done on student debt at Ferris. The average figure used for this comparison, students who began as Ferris freshmen and graduated from Ferris with debt in 2013-14, was \$35,720. One of the tables in *Student Debt and the Class of 2014* lists twenty high-debt public colleges and universities and includes Ferris. The threshold to be included in this listing was \$34,150. With continued progress in helping address student debt, it is my sincere hope that we will not appear on this list in the future.

Our continued efforts on this challenge include raising the financial literacy of our students so they can make informed decisions about debt. As an institution we are committed to constraining costs, raising institutional financial support, doubling our scholarship base, and reducing time to degree. This strategy is outlined in a presentation I made last November, which is accessible here - http://ferris.edu/president/presentations/2014-2015/Student_Debt_Forums_November2014.pdf

We are making progress on these efforts –

- For the past four years our tuition increase has been 2.6%, 2.2%, 2.2%, and 2.4%.
- Over the past decade our cost for educating a student has increased by an average of 2.4%, approximately the same rate as the Consumer Price Index (CPI).
- The net price of a Ferris education will soon be at the average of all Michigan public universities. University financial aid is now 11% of our annual budget, up from 9% three years ago.
- This past year donations to the university were a record \$12 million with significant commitments to student scholarships.
- In 2013 682 students graduated in four years and 651 students in five years.

As a university we are committed to helping students with the financial costs of college. There is clear evidence these efforts are working. For this fall our financial aid office issued \$1.25 million less in student loans. This progress can only continue through sustained efforts over time with attention to costs, financial aid, scholarships, and progress toward graduation.

Your success in decreasing indebtedness for our students, especially considering the context in which this has been achieved, is truly commendable. While we have received recent increases in state support, currently we are allocated \$5 million less in real, non-inflation adjusted state dollars than in 2003. Yet today we educate a third more students and award twice as many degrees.

Our university serves many students from lower-income families. Often these students are the first in their families to attend college. This is borne out by the percentage of Ferris students who receive Pell Grants – which are need-based – as well as the number of students (more than ten percent) who receive need-based Tuition Incentive Program.

And still we are making progress. This is an area that is of critical importance to our students and their future. I will continue to share our efforts and progress at reducing debt with you as we work on the very important issues of affordability and student debt. Thank you for making this difference for our students and for helping to keep access and opportunity alive and well at Ferris today.

David L. Eisler, president