House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education

February 25, 2021

A Crisis for Our Students:

TIP Financial Support
Fosters Student Opportunity, Access and Success

David L. Eisler, president
Logan Evans, TIP student
Chairman Huizenga and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education, thank you for taking time from your busy schedules this morning to hear from Ferris State University. It is an honor to appear before you today and I thank you for this opportunity to do so.

In speaking with you I am talking with our friends and supporters. You are our advocates in Lansing. We need your help and support more now than ever, and I look forward to working with you.

Students come to Ferris from every county in Michigan, and many are from the districts you represent and serve:

- Rep. Hammoud – 29 students
- Rep. Green – 130 students
- Rep. Johnson – 418 students
- Rep. Brann – 422 students
- Rep. Slagh – 491 students
- Rep. Huizenga – 758 students

These students are your constituents. They are our next construction managers, designers, police officers, nurses, optometrists, pharmacists, and welders; all future leaders for Michigan. Thank you for representing their interests in Lansing.

At Ferris State University, we are fortunate to have a strong Board of Trustees, and I want to recognize each of them. These are committed citizens who have a strong interest in our state’s future and who are advocates for higher education and our students. Our trustees include:

- Amna P. Seibold of East Grand Rapids – Chair
- Ana L. Ramirez-Saenz of Grand Rapids – Vice Chair
- Rupesh K. Srivastava of Wixom – Secretary
- George K. Heartwell of Newaygo
- Kurt A. Hofman of Grand Rapids
- Kari L. Sederburg of East Lansing
- Ron E. Sneed of Stanwood
- LaShanda R. Thomas of Grosse Point

In 1884, Woodbridge and Helen Ferris founded the Big Rapids Industrial School as a place to provide displaced loggers, subsistence farmers and others an opportunity to learn the skills they needed to make a better living in a changing economy. The Ferris’ educational philosophy was both practical and visionary. It was also inclusive.
Women comprised a third of the first class of 15 students and the school accepted students of color early in its history, reflecting the Ferris’ egalitarian vision that guides the University today.

Mr. Ferris founded his school around opportunity. Today we celebrate and embrace that value, remembering his words delivered in 1916 as he was concluding his second term as Governor of our state –

“My plea in Michigan –
and it will be my plea to the last breath I draw
and the last word I speak –
is education for all children, all men and all women of Michigan,
all the people in all our states, all the time.”

In 1884 our area’s primary industry, lumber extraction, had peaked, forcing many people to retrain for new jobs – some of which were not yet even in existence. Replace the demise of the timber business with the rise of automation, information technology and artificial intelligence, and you have a pretty good description of what our students face today. In retrospect it is easy to see how education was crucial not just to improving the lives of individuals, but to the state as a whole. That truth remains the same today.

Opportunity and Success

At Ferris we provide opportunity for our students. But it is not enough to provide opportunity and access. We go far beyond this, first doing everything we can to see that students graduate, and second, by graduating students with hands-on experience prepared for career success. Two national studies document this commitment.

In 2019 the New York Times published a study by David Leonhardt and Sahil Chinoy (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/05/23/opinion/sunday/college-graduation-rates-ranking.html). In this they ranked colleges through a comparison of the expected graduation rates (based on the characteristics of their entering students) and their actual graduation rates. There was one Michigan school included in their top-performing schools. Ferris State University was ranked 14th nationally in their largest performing schools. Our students graduate at a rate that is five percent above expectation! (Slide One) This past year our graduation rate was even better, the highest in history. In the past 18 years we have raised our student graduation rate by 65%.

At Ferris 89% of our graduates are employed in their field of study. Their success can be documented through social mobility. In 2020 College Mobility Net ranked colleges and universities based on the social mobility of their students. This Social Mobility Index measures the extent to which a college or university educates more economically disadvantaged students (with family incomes below the national median) at lower tuition and graduates them into good paying jobs (https://www.socialmobilityindex.org/). Ferris State University is second among the 40 Michigan colleges and universities ranked through this methodology. (Slide Two)
This is what we want for our sons and daughters, to have a better life than us. We foster this social mobility at Ferris because we do what our state and you expect of us – we help students, often from very humble backgrounds, to prepare for a better life.

College Mobility Net also ranks these same 40 Michigan colleges and universities on their average student debt. For people from backgrounds of economic hardship it is essential to limit student debt. At Ferris State University we graduate our students with the second lowest average debt of the public universities in this survey. (Slide Three)

There is a reason for this debt figure. It comes from a commitment to constrain cost and provide financial support to our students. For first-generation and economically challenged students, college affordability is critical. Net price is a federal statistic each college and university is required to place on its website. It is an all-inclusive cost for college including tuition, fees, room and board, books, travel and incidentals, minus the average award of financial aid. (Slide Four) At Ferris we include a calculator on our website so students can calculate this without personal identification.

Viewed over the period from 2009-2019, our efforts to keep college affordable for students at Ferris State University are readily apparent. During this period the net price, the actual amount students pay for their education, has declined.

- Students from families earning less $30,000 pay 43.6% less
- Students from families earning between $30,000 - $48,000 pay 29.8% less
- Students from families earning between $48,000 - $75,000 pay 16.8% less
- Students from families earning between $75,000 - $110,000 pay 2.9% less

Over this decade the average net price for Ferris State University has declined by 8.9%. In comparison, the average for Michigan public universities during this period is an increase of 15.4%. (Slide Five)

**Tuition Incentive Program**

Over my 18 years as president of Ferris State University there have been many opportunities to testify before legislators. As I reflect back of those years there is no more important conversation than the one we have today. The successes I have shared today and the futures of thousands of Ferris students are at risk. This challenge to their future comes from proposed changes in the Executive Budget to limit support for them from the Tuition Incentive Program.

Because of Ferris State University’s unique history of providing opportunity and our strong associate degree programs, we are a top choice for first-generation and economically challenged students. As president, I cannot stress enough the importance of the Tuition Incentive Program (TIP) funding in helping these students.
TIP is a state program funded primarily through the federal TANF program. Students in grades 6 through 12 who are Michigan Medicaid-eligible for 24 months in a 36-consecutive-month period can qualify for TIP. TIP provides an incentive to students to complete high school and go on to college by pledging to pay their tuition and fees for an associate degree or certificate programs (Phase I), as well as up to $2,000 toward a bachelor degree (Phase II). This is a promise made by the state to these students and is something they depend upon to make college possible.

This year Ferris enrolled 1,667 TIP students; 1,287 in Phase I and 380 in Phase II. Helping these students is at the core of our mission. With our career-oriented degree programs Ferris is uniquely positioned to help lower-income students be successful and find employment in high demand, high paying fields. At Ferris students first earn their associate degree and many continue on to earn a bachelor’s degree. In doing so, we help them escape the endless cycle of economic poverty. Because of our focus on student success and our experience with first generation students, in the past seven years TIP students have earned 2,480 degrees at Ferris.

(Slide Six)

The TIP program personifies the opportunity we provide at Ferris State University. Please remember that we serve as the community college for students in our five adjacent counties. We attract extraordinary people to our campus, students who are determined that education is their pathway to the future. Once these students arrive, we go to exceptional lengths to help ensure their success. We have a full-time TIP coordinator dedicated to working with these students. His efforts are extended by college success coaches, upper division students who work as peer mentors. As a result, our TIP students graduate and graduate at a higher rate than any community college in the state. Most importantly, our TIP students graduate with work-ready degrees – over 78% in high demand careers. No other institution in the state has this record of success. (Slide Seven)

You can learn much about TIP by seeing how many students it helps, but it is in hearing the individual stories of our TIP students that its true value becomes clear. Logan Evans, a senior Product Design Engineering Technology student from Three Rivers, is participating today via Zoom. I have asked Logan to share his story with you.

Good Morning. My name is Logan Evans. I am an engineer, a son, a Ferris State Bulldog. And an optimist. I testify before you today to share my story. As I do, I encourage you to keep in mind that I am not an anomaly. My story is but one among hundreds of equally inspiring stories across our beautiful campus.

My childhood was spent in the foster care system. I spent ages 3-10 living nomadically, moving house to house, family to family, town to town, never finding a place to call home. It was difficult growing up in an unstable environment, especially during the most formative years of life. I developed identity issues and lacked a sense of belonging. Ultimately, and most detrimentally, I lost hope.
It is difficult to summarize two decades of adversity in a short recitation, though the fact that I speak before you today is a good indication that I found the hope I so desperately needed.

After high school I had three tenets that directed my future: I want to help as many people as I can. I want to be a great husband and father. And I want to break the generational misfortune that plagued my biological family.

I decided in order to accomplish these goals, I needed to attend university, specifically on campus at Ferris State University, with the help of the Tuition Incentive Program. TIP has been so fundamental in my success, I decided to stay for four years. As a peer success coach, I’ve spoken to hundreds of TIP students on campus, and I would like to redefine what the Tuition Incentive Program is aside from numbers in a budget.

TIP provides the opportunity for a better future, as it allows students to obtain a life-changing education.

TIP’s benefits to mental health rival that of any prescription. With TIP, students spend less time worrying about finances and more time becoming the highly trained employees our workforce depends on.

TIP is a doorway to exposure, providing students the ability to see a world outside of their hometowns, create connections and experience diversity.

TIP is a tool that is wielded by growing minds to build communities and ideas that they lacked in their youth.

Finally, the Tuition Incentive Program is a drop of water in a well of opportunity. It has created options that ripple outward, impacting every aspect of my life. TIP provided me an avenue to earn my bachelor’s degree in four years. It has given me friendships, connections, and the family I longed for. Having this support has broadened my horizons and sense of empathy. But most importantly, TIP gave me hope when there was none.

I am humbled to share my story with you, but my story is only a chapter. Hundreds of students on campus receive TIP funding, and their stories are just as powerful as mine. The Tuition Incentive Program has changed our lives for the better.

With this said, I am helping people, I am going to be a great father and husband, and I am going to break my family’s cycle of misfortune. Thank you.

Thank you Logan for that compelling testimony. You make each of us here today proud and hopeful for the future of our state and nation.

The National Conference on State Legislatures’ publication “The Path to a Degree,” asserts that, “Prioritizing and preserving college access for underrepresented students can improve the state’s economy; increase per-capita income; improve individual lives;
and fill workforce needs.” For TIP students Ferris State University provides -

- Increased degree program options for students
- A safe geographic location option for students from larger cities and small towns alike
- The chance to live on campus and participate fully in campus life
- A full array of recognized academic support services
- Unlike other institutions, full-time dedicated support specifically for the TIP Scholars program
- High-quality instruction from full-time faculty who are teachers and experts in their fields
- Small class sizes which allow for more individual attention and assistance
- Higher retention rates from year one to year two

For these reasons, the Tuition Incentive Program is exactly the type of program Michigan needs during these challenging fiscal times. The simple truth is that at Ferris State University the TIP program works and works extraordinarily well.

The proposed language in the Executive Budget puts this success in graduating economically challenges students prepared for success both in a career and in life at risk. The restrictions are a blunt instrument attacking the futures of TIP students at Michigan public universities that offer associate degrees - Ferris State University, Lake State Superior State University, and Northern Michigan University. The proposed changes would be devastating for our programs and our students. If this becomes a reality, students like Logan next year would be forced to pay the difference in tuition previously funded by the TIP program, $4,800 for next year. Simply put this will be unaffordable for them and you will make impossible their dream of a college education.

Closing Thoughts

This is the seventh time since 2010 that I have testified in Lansing, working to preserve opportunity and access for our TIP students. In reflecting on this experience, I am drawn back to the students who have assisted me by sharing their stories before committees like this one today. (Slide Eight)

Each student’s story is special, and I would like to relate each of them to you. For today, I will share just three.

Melissa DiVietri accompanied me during my testimony in 2010. At the time she was a 21-year old freshman who came from a family of seven adopted children. She has a rare disease called sacral agenesis, which limits her ability to walk, but it no way limits her spirit which fills up a room. Today she is a successful entrepreneur and resides in Miami, working with an all-female team that spans the globe developing international music and art festivals throughout North America, Central America, Europe and Asia.
In 2017 I shared Kaylia Ervin’s story with this committee. Kaylia was a foster child who earned her degree in criminal justice from Ferris with no family support whatsoever. Her junior year she took in her sister from an abusive foster situation so she could graduate from high school. I know Kaylia well as she worked in our office. It was a proud day when she earned her law degree from Michigan State University. Today she is living in Florida, preparing to take the state bar exam.

Miranda Roberts testified with me in 2018. She qualified for TIP funding and the state assured her she would receive this. However, because the budget passed in 2017 capped the amount any institution could receive in TIP funding at $8.5 million, Miranda did not receive the TIP funding she was promised her last year of school. In order to afford her last year at Ferris, she had to give up everything she could not afford - access to the campus health services, our recreation facilities and more. She feared as a commuter from Baldwin that she would not complete her degree. She was determined she would live on campus. To do this, she gave up her meal plan and worked two-part time jobs while going to school full-time. Miranda persevered and earned her associate degree. Today she is finishing up her undergraduate degree in occupational therapy at Indiana University South Bend.

There is a commonality in these stories – life-changing success. Despite obstacles and a lack of support that would deter many of us, they are changing the trajectory of their future. Ultimately, education is about people and the incredible power knowledge has to change lives. Students like Melissa, Kaylia, Tekarra, Dymend, Miranda, Shae and Logan personify what makes Ferris State University a great American university, committed to opportunity and to access. Each of us in this room understands the crucial difference access to higher education can make and the opportunity it has created for us. We can and will succeed in this effort with these students, but we need your help because we cannot do it alone.

When you consider funding for our students please remember these stories. Students come to Ferris because of the support we provide, the degrees we offer, and the in-demand career opportunities our TIP students receive. We know we can help TIP students break the cycle of poverty and become successful, productive citizens. Just like Logan who is with us today virtually, our students need and deserve this support.

If the proposed limit on TIP support to Ferris State University students is not lifted, sadly more of these future success stories will not become a reality. Limiting this support for severely economically disadvantaged students is not in our state’s or our students’ best interest. We know we can help TIP students break the cycle of poverty and become successful, productive citizens.

Logan said this well:

*TIP provides the opportunity for a better future, as it allows students to obtain a life-changing education.*
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But most importantly, TIP gave me hope when there was none.

Help to preserve this future for our students. Working together we can provide them the support our state has promised them and that they so desperately deserve. On behalf of these students both now and in the future, thank you so very much.

These materials are accessible online at https://www.ferris.edu/president/presentations/homepage.htm