

# **The Academic Incubator:**

## **Ferris First**

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### **Overview**

American universities are at a simple cross-roads. For the past 100 plus years, universities have served well in preparing a highly educated yet limited segment of our population. Prior to the 1940's the vast majority of universities served to educate the select few based on a classical curricular model. The arts, sciences, business, language and so on made up the curriculum. Certainly, there were those universities that had a different focus and tradition (i.e., the Ferris Institute) but the majority of academic institutions were devoted to teaching traditional subjects following traditional models. Today, it's not much different. For the most part, what we taught then is what we teach today.

Like any institution there have been some notable changes in higher education. Yet, most of these evolutionary changes have been around the issue of access and not of curriculum offerings. The GI bill following World War II and Korea had a significant impact on the number of people seeking a college degree. This was continued through the 1960's and 1970's with much greater efforts at making college accessible to women and minorities. However, while growth happened, we saw little in the area academic transformation. With some notable exceptions, the curricular models of the past are much the same that we continue today. It is interesting to note, for all of the important efforts to expand access still only around 24% of our population in Michigan hold a bachelors degree.

Today, most of the attention on higher education still remains on access with little attention paid to developing new, innovative and responsive curriculum. This is in part based on our traditional structures designed to perpetuate a traditional curriculum. This is in part based on a singular view of what higher education is and should be. We have well defined structures for maintaining our status quo and we have well defined norms on what it is to have a college degree. Together these cause us to just nibble on the edges on academic innovation rather than embrace academic innovation. Yet, as we see significant changes in our society and in our economy, we need to find a mechanism that will allow us to develop new models in support of new and innovative academic programming while we continue to support the strong academic programs that are our foundation.

The Academic Incubator is based on the notion that universities that are nimble, responsive, and support economic development will be the successful universities of the future. These academically responsive universities will produce the graduates that will lead economic growth and create an expanded relevance to encourage even more to attain a higher education. The

Academic Incubator is a process and a structure that supports and encourages academic innovation through collaboration, cooperative and innovation. The Academic Incubator is a place to go with an emerging idea that needs to be supported and nurtured with the potential of creating true transformation.

This past year President Eisler appointed a team to think broadly and look to the future of Ferris State University. This group, this think tank, Ferris First, was charged to explore what might be possible without regard to what was and what is. Ferris First was charged with what could be. The Academic Incubator emerged from these discussions and continues to be debated, explored and embraced.

### **Goals**

The goals of the academic incubator include:

- Provide a well defined location and process for academic entrepreneurs to vet ideas and explore possibilities.
- Provide a team approach to considering and supporting academic innovation.
- Support the development of precise business plans for programmatic development and implementation.
- Provide financial support in the exploratory and developmental phases of new academic program development.
- Support experimental curricular development.
- Enhance partnerships outside of the university in support of academic innovation.
- Support degree and non-degree certification innovation.
- Create

### **Structure: Academic Innovation Board**

As an academic enterprise it is important that the Academic Incubator follow an academic model. As such, the Academic Incubator will have two primary structural components. First, the Academic Innovation Board will have primary responsibility is to help vet and promote new academic innovation. Second, an operational structure including a director and staff charged not only with the operational issues of the Academic Incubator but in promoting academic innovation on and off campus.

#### *Academic Innovation Board*

The Academic Innovation Board will be a group that is charged with the consideration, promotion and financial support of academic innovation. The Academic Innovation Board will be made up of innovative academics, external leaders and others that have a strong interest and experience in innovation. The Academic Innovation Board will be appointed by the Provost and meet regularly to discuss and promote academic innovation. The Academic Innovation Board will also support the development of funding to support academic innovation.

### *Operational Structure*

A director for the Academic Incubator will be appointed by the Provost and report directly to the Provost. The Director will have the day to day responsibility for the operation of the Academic Incubator and be the direct point of contact for faculty and others as they pursue academic innovation. Support staff will be provided through the Office of Academic Affairs. It is anticipated that the Academic Incubator will have office space in Academic Affairs.

### **Financial Model**

The financial structure for the Academic Incubator is two-fold. First, funding must be available to support the operational structure of the Academic Incubator. Second, and more importantly, are the startup or innovative funds that must be available for distribution by the Academic Incubator to select programs. The Office of Academic Affairs will provide initial funding for the director and support staff. One possible model, is to identify an innovative faculty member to release to do these duties. However, other models may also be considered. The Provost's office has identified an initial \$25,000 to support the operational structure of the Academic Incubator with additional staff and office support.

The innovation fund is the key ingredient. This is the fund available for distribution in support of new and innovative academic programming. The initial startup goal for the Academic Incubator is \$100,000 with the need for rapid expansion depending on programmatic needs. For launching the Academic Incubator in the fall of 2011, \$30,000 to \$50,000 should be in place with continued efforts to expand that pool.

### **Time Line**

There is a great deal of momentum for the Academic Incubator from Ferris First on to the broad campus community. Faculty are ready. The communities we serve are ready. The goal is to launch the Academic Incubator Fall 2011. These are a few of the initial steps that can provide direction to the creation of an implementation plan.

Appoint a director and staff - April, 2011

Identify and select the Academic Innovation Board - May, 2011

Hold initial meeting and retreat - May, 2011

Develop promotional and announcement materials - July - August, 2011

Hold campus and college level meetings - September, 2011