

President's Memorandum to Faculty and Staff

Office of the President
January 24, 2011

Jim Crow Museum

In this week after our Martin Luther King, Jr. celebrations it is a pleasure to report that Ferris' Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia has received a \$250,000 challenge grant from the DTE Corporation. If you have had the opportunity to visit the current physical site of the museum, you know that this collection of artifacts is in need of a new home. The current site is too small to display the museum's thousands of items and place them in their proper historical context. This grant from DTE is an important step forward in our goal of developing a space in which this collection can most fully serve its purpose of being a resource for teaching and learning in the service of racial understanding.

The DTE grant is especially timely because of the growth of the Jim Crow Museum's collection. Recently, the museum received two important gifts from private collectors. The Vaughn Collection was built by Otis Vaughn, who as a child picked cotton and experienced first-hand the effects of Jim Crow laws in the south. This is a remarkable collection of artifacts that documents the African American experience from the shores of West Africa through the Civil Rights period and into the present.

The other gift the museum recently received is a collection of approximately 100 rare dolls assembled by Marc Charbonnet, a successful designer and owner of the New York interior design firm, Marc Edward Charbonnet Associates. His collection of dolls includes both those meant to demean African Americans as well as those that celebrate black culture. The Jim Crow Museum has a very vibrant Web presence, which is how Mr. Charbonnet discovered this resource. www.ferris.edu/jimcrow will continue to be an important component of the museum's outreach even when a new physical site is finally a reality. If you have not visited the museum's website, please find time to do so.

Another way the museum has made its collection more widely available is through two traveling exhibits. Currently, one of those exhibits, "Them: Images of Separation," is on display at Kendall College of Art and Design in their Kendall Gallery through Feb. 5. Although the original impetus that moved David Pilgrim to collect these artifacts was to document images of African Americans, "Them" shows the breadth of the museum's collection. In addition to images of African Americans, "Them" provides examples of how Hispanics, Jews, women, homosexuals and many "Others" have been denigrated in popular culture. Although I had viewed this exhibition before, I took time to see it again this past week. It is a powerful statement on how society can be so intolerant of differences. If you have the opportunity, I hope you will take in this exhibit.

I want to thank David Pilgrim, the University's Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, for his vision and foresight in establishing the museum and working to make it as widely available as possible. The grant from DTE moves us closer to achieving our long-standing goal of expanding an important resource for our University and region.

Dashboard Indicators

For some time we have been working on a graphical way to display important comparative data about our institution. Last Tuesday I presented this digital dashboard, which includes data points about our University, its people, finances and other factors. The dashboard provides five years of data for 53 different indicators. Currently the dashboard is accessible only from the University Intranet at <http://www.ferris.edu/fsuintranet> . From there you can click on either the “University Dashboard,” or else “Dashboard Descriptions,” which is a pdf narrative that describes each of the entries along with the source of the data.

For me, two of the most powerful pieces of data in the dashboard are the increase in students qualifying for the Pell Grant and the increase in retention from first to second year for bachelor’s degree students. Part of the reason for the increase in Pell recipients is the new award guidelines. It is also confirmation that many of our students come from challenging financial circumstances and have significant funding needs. The increase in retention reflects many things – concentrated efforts by faculty and staff, an environment that encourages success and confirmation that for students Ferris is a first-choice school.

In terms of students, you can see the continued trend of record headcount enrollments and student credit hours taken. The data show an improvement in the yield and the percentage of admitted students who attend. Also, we have reversed the declining trend in the number of first-time students who attend Ferris. These, combined with significant increases in transfer students, are important factors in enrollment strength. Also, we continue a pattern of increased numbers of minority students. In addition to improved retention, there are significant increases in graduation rates after both four and six years of study. Graduation rates for minority students have improved, but still lag behind campus averages.

For faculty and staff there are strong continued patterns of very limited turnover. It is worth noting that these figures do not include people who retired. Although the overall number of employees has declined, the number of funded faculty positions at the University has remained relatively stable. A significant area of concern is the number of minority faculty and staff on campus. Provost Fritz Erickson and Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion David Pilgrim are chairing a University-wide task force to develop approaches to reverse this trend.

In finances there is a continued decline in state appropriations, but an increase in revenue from tuition. In the context of sharply decreased state financial support, we have significantly increased institutional financial support for students. We have also received increased federal support for students. With more transfer students we are experiencing a decline in housing occupancy, which impacts on our Auxiliary Enterprises budget. Annual donations to the University are up and Foundation assets are rebounding from the disruption in financial markets.

Among other factors, it is good to see the decline in criminal acts. The decrease in alcohol arrests since 2003 seems especially significant.

Putting the Dashboard online is another attempt to provide information about the academic, economic and cultural health of our University. Please feel free to share with me your thoughts about this tool and about what these indicators say about our institution, its current path and future.

Festival of the Arts

Now in its third year since being restarted in 2008, the Festival of the Arts offers the Ferris and Big Rapids communities a month-long schedule of extraordinary cultural events. This year's festival kicks off on Thursday, Jan. 27, 6-7:30 p.m., with an opening reception at ArtWorks in downtown Big Rapids. The reception features remarks by John Varineau, Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra associate conductor, and also kicks off a show of three-dimensional art by Tom Kreuger of Lake Leelanau. Mr. Varineau and his wife, Gwen, will perform on clarinet and piano during the reception. This event is free and open to the public.

The Festival of the Arts ranges from local artists and performers to those who are nationally recognized – and some who are both. Additional first week events include an architecture display, chainsaw art demonstration, 19th century guitar and fortepiano concert, theatre workshop, and excerpts from the Phantom of the Opera. The second week includes workshops on flower arranging, welding for artists, pottery, and digital photography, together with one-act plays, a foreign film, and fiddlers concert. Music, visual arts, theater, dance and much more make the Festival for the Arts one of the most vital cultural events in the state. A full list of the 57 events in 32 days – many of which are either free or have very modest ticket prices – is available at www.ferris.edu/festival.

Please join me in thanking Bruce Dilg and his committee of Scott Cohen, Bill Donahue, Mark Gifford and Ed Mallett, as well as Jack Batdorff and the many volunteers it takes to make the Festival for the Arts a success. I hope that you will take in as many of these events as possible. I look forward to seeing you there!

Sincerely,

David L. Eisler, President