

President's Memorandum to Faculty and Staff

Office of the President
October 4, 2010

Planning for Student Success

When I first joined Ferris State University in 2003 much of the debate in Michigan concerned the importance of higher education. This discussion, accelerated by the implosion of the domestic automobile industry, marked the end of an era when high paying jobs were available to workers with limited education. Governor Granholm deserves credit for helping to promote this discussion through the creation of the Cherry Commission, which affirmed the importance of higher education.

Today even in a declining population base, more Michigan citizens are seeking advanced degrees. We see the result of this in Big Rapids and all across Michigan where Ferris offers degree programs. However there is a second part of this equation. While it is important to attend college, much of the value of a college education is not achieved if students do not graduate. As a university we believe strongly in the opportunity we create for students and in doing so understand that the real pay off occurs once a student leaves our campuses prepared for lifelong success.

Here at Ferris we have seen both retention and graduation rates reach record levels. This results from many factors – increased admission standards, higher academic expectations for students, a myriad of services to assist students, and most importantly faculty and staff who truly care about students. However, the future requires that we do even more to encourage student success. This idea is embedded throughout the strategic plan that guides our institution.

Throughout the summer and over the past weeks I have visited with people both on our campuses and beyond, asking how they define student success. One thing clear to me is that student success means very different things to different people. Our Strategic Planning and Resource Council has made the topic of student success the focus of their upcoming meeting on October 12th. The SPARC Chair, Professor Leonard Johnson, recently asked his freshman and sophomore students how they defined student success.

Their responses were both insightful and mature. Multiple students said their success would include graduating in a timely manner. Others wrote about how their education needed to prepare them for a good career. A common theme was the nature of learning. While some talked about getting good grades, many said that more important was mastering the material in a way that would serve them well once they were out of college. This emphasis on the “deeper” aspect of learning shows, I believe, that our students are looking to be challenged to fullest extent of their abilities. Leonard has given me permission to share these results with you and they are accessible here – http://www.ferris.edu/president/sparc/student_success_survey2010.pdf . What a simple, but powerful concept to ask students their perspective. I want to express my thanks to Professor Johnson and his students for helping to provide this important viewpoint.

As a university I believe it is very important to consider what student success means to us, reach shared understandings, and the commitment to build on our current efforts to improve the prospects for success for our students. I would very much enjoy hearing your thoughts – and

those of your students - regarding their success. If your schedule permits I would encourage you to join SPARC on Oct. 12th at 3 p.m. in the West Campus Commons when they begin the discussion on this topic.

State Approves Higher Ed Budget and TIP Funding

Last week the Michigan legislature passed its 2010-11 fiscal year budget for the state. This included a 2.8 percent cut in support to higher education. For us here at Ferris, the budget means that we will receive \$1.4 million less than we did last year. This is about the level of funding decline we anticipated, and the ongoing cost-saving measures we have embarked upon - including the Early Retirement Incentives from earlier this year - have helped position us to absorb this cut without impacting our core mission.

Perhaps more disturbing than this year's budget is the position the state finds itself in when it will have to tackle the 2011-12 budget. This year's agreement was made possible by using remaining federal stimulus funds and some one-time accounting moves. This means that next year's lawmakers will face a structural deficit of about \$1.6 billion. This represents a \$1 billion deficit in the \$7 billion general fund where public universities are funded and a \$600,000 shortfall in the school aid fund for K-12 education. The next steps will be up to our new governor and legislature. Several developments will further complicate this process. Given the political climate in Washington and growing concerns about the national deficit, this is the final year of federal stimulus funding. Both gubernatorial candidates have expressed their desire to eliminate Michigan Business Tax and to avoid tax increases. The structural deficit in the Michigan budget continues to grow and it will be exceedingly difficult to address without increased revenue.

One bright part of the budget concerned the Tuition Incentive Program, or TIP, which provides scholarships for Michigan residents who receive Medicaid through the Family Independence Agency. You may recall that the Governor proposed limiting support to community college tuition levels in her executive budget. With assistance from student Melissa DiVietri, I testified on three separate occasions to advocate restoring this funding. Not only did the legislature restore this funding, it increased it by \$6.2 million. Rep. George Cushingberry, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, together with Rep. Joan Bauer and Sen. Tony Stamas, chairs of the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees were important partners in this success. Ferris offers career-oriented associate degrees that qualify for this program, which effectively help students escape an otherwise continuing cycle of poverty. Currently there are more than 700 TIP students on campus, many times more than any other university in our state, which is a prime example of how we embody Woodbridge Ferris' commitment to opportunity to this day.

Homecoming

This week we celebrate Homecoming. It is always an exciting time on campus as alumni return to campus to reconnect with former classmates and see the ways in which the University has grown. This year's highlights include a bonfire on Oct. 7 at 8 p.m. in Lot 61 by Brophy/McNerney Hall, and a performance by comedian Christian Finnegan on Friday, at 7 p.m. in Williams Auditorium. Saturday includes the dedication of Helen's Garden at 9:30 a.m., a variety of events and college reunions, the traditional parade at noon in downtown Big Rapids, a

gridiron contest against Findlay at 2 p.m, and the Homecoming Afterglow at 7 p.m., which this year will be at the Gate.

A full schedule is available at <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/alumni/Homecoming/schedule.htm> . I hope that you will take in one or more of the many Homecoming events and look forward to seeing you there.

Sincerely,

David L. Eisler, President