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Chicago Sun-Times

August 3, 2006

Meeks to stop using n-word -- but he wants tradeoff

I am so repulsed by the word "nigger" I vowed never to use it sometime ago, and to check anyone who uses it in my presence. "It is self-loathing that gives this racial slur breath. That makes blacks the only race that has adopted the insults of its oppressors and embraced those insults as its own," I wrote in 1997. So, of course I was disappointed that the Rev. and state Sen. James T. Meeks has publicly used the word -- again.

Last week, Meeks compared some elected officials to "house niggers" in a sermon critical of the Chicago Public Schools system.

"House niggers" is a derogatory description of slaves who worked in the slave owner's house and benefited from the close relationship. Today, it is still a derogatory term commonly used by blacks to denounce other blacks.

Meeks also used the controversial slur publicly while protesting alleged racial profiling on the South Side. In an interview, Meeks accused police officers of stopping drivers in cars they deemed to be "niggermobiles."

"Why are you using that word?" I asked him during a telephone conversation Wednesday.

"That's what I'm preaching about tonight," Meeks replied. "I am not using the word at all anymore. I am going to officially retire my use of it."

It's about time.

Meeks asking for a trade-off

Meeks' protest against Mayor Daley and Chicago Public Schools has been overshadowed by the controversy.

"I made the remarks three weeks ago at a Wednesday night church service," he said, "and somebody dropped off the tape of the service at a TV station."

The mid-week service at Meek's House of Hope is broadcast live.

But Meeks isn't joining the n-word eradication movement out of shame.

What he's really asking for is a tradeoff.

"My appeal to white America is this: I will stop using that word, and it will never come out of my mouth again," he said. "But I am expecting them to be as equally passionate about ridding society of the achievement gap as they are passionate about ridding society of this word."

"I want them to be equally passionate about redlining. I want them to be passionate about the resource gap. How can they be comfortable knowing that white children get more money per pupil for education than black kids? How can they sleep at night?"

Erasing an error?

Meeks argues that the eradication of "nigger" movement is really being led by whites.

"White people don't like the word because it's a symbol of white racism," he said. "They recognize that it was an error on the part of their forefathers, and they want to attempt to erase the error. But what they cannot do is rid society of the scars that it has left."

"If we are serious about getting rid of the n-word, we should be serious about getting rid of the ills it helped bring about," he said.

I don't see it that way.

Rather than whites trying to erase history, the furor over Meeks' remarks is driven by the double-standard that has sprung up over who is allowed to use the word.

If whites are going to be hounded out of careers over their use of the word, they are going to be outraged when blacks use the word with immunity.

All you have to do is Google "nigger" to see that white racists embrace this word with the enthusiasm of black rappers. The only difference is white racists are stirring up hate while black rappers are getting rich from exploiting that hate.

As noted by Ferris State University sociology Professor David Pilgrim and his colleague, languages and literature Professor Phillip Middleton, white supremacists have spread their anti-black views on sites with names such as "Niggers Must Die," "Hang A Nigger for America" and "Nigger Jokes Central."

"The word 'nigger' carries with it much of the hatred and repulsion directed toward Africans and African Americans. Historically, 'nigger' defined, limited and mocked African Americans. It was a term of exclusion, a verbal justification for discrimination," said Pilgrim and Middleton.

Word overshadowing campaign

Obviously, Meeks is frustrated that it is his use of this word -- not his campaign to improve public education -- that is making news.

"How can we watch 'The Oprah Winfrey Show' and see whites going to better schools with books and computers, qualified teachers and no peeling paint and watch black kids go to school with no books, no computers and few qualified teachers?" he asked.

"But we are appalled by the use of this word. I think that is straining a gnat and swallowing a camel."

Maybe.

But spitting out the "n-word" certainly doesn't help.

Ludington Daily News

August 7, 2006

Sixth sculpture sets sail next week

"Reflections" has been a long time coming.

The sixth Waterfront Park sculpture - a stainless steel sail design, stretching 17 feet tall - will be installed Tuesday and dedicated Saturday, Aug. 12.

But it was several years ago when sculpture donor Joan Schoenherr came up with the idea.

"It's really going to be a different sculpture in that it's deviated from the stark realism of the other sculptures, which I hope will add interest to the park," Joan said.

"Reflections," is a hint toward the abstract, deviating some from the five realistic sculptures already in the park. It's also stainless steel, not bronze.

Joan and her husband Lee are sponsoring the "Reflections" and are excited about the upcoming dedication. "I can't sleep," Joan said.

They chose the name "Reflections" is symbolic for a number of reasons.

"As Lee and I look out at the reflection of the many boats on the water, it paints a lovely picture," Joan said. "But the name has deeper meaning, also, as we think about what we are doing with our lives and where we are headed. It also relates to Ludington's history when schooners carried lumber from our city to Chicago and Milwaukee. And boating is certainly a part of our present, and as we contemplate Ludington's past and present, it's also important to consider Ludington's future."

Joan, a member of the Waterfront Sculpture Task Force since its inception in 1999, is the chair of the selection committee. She's been working with Irina Koukhanova, a sculptor from Cleveland, Ohio, on this project for the past two years. The pieces are now complete, and the sculpture is to be installed at the park early next week.

The strips of matte-finished stainless steel will form three sails stretching 17 feet tall, atop a base on the tile-covered concrete near the park's seating semicircle. The concrete base in place now, and blue-and tan colored tile, to simulate the look of water, may be added this weekend.

"It's going to be a wonderful addition to our park," Task Force Chairman Don Clingan told the Ludington Daily News.

"Boating and waterfront recreation were two of the themes selected by the Waterfront Sculpture Task Force when we first planned the project. 'Reflections' will be a beautiful new piece of art that supports that theme perfectly, and it will remind us of the time when sailing vessels played an important transportation roll in Ludington's economy."

Irina Koukhanova attended the Institute of Art and Industrial Design, Moscow, Russia, for five years in the second half of the '80s. After moving to the USA in 1991, she received her MFA from the University of Notre Dame in 1996. Irina has been teaching sculpture at the university level since 1997. She is currently an Associate Professor of Sculpture at Cleveland State University.

Besides this piece, Irina's sculptural pursuits include two completed public art commissions: a sculptural composition called "Muse" installed in 1998 in Big Rapids on the campus of Ferris State University and a sculpture in an architectural setting in downtown Ann Arbor titled "Urban Configuration" unveiled in 2002.

Irina's exhibition record consists of regional and national exhibitions. Her work has been on display at "Pier Walk 2003," Navy Pier, Chicago, and has been selected for a studio visit from the curator of the 2004 Whitney Biennale, New York City.

The Bay City Times

August 14, 2006

Kirtland, Ferris ease path to several degree programs

ROSCOMMON - Kirtland Community College has signed articulation agreements with Ferris State University that will assist students who wish to transfer into Ferris' Respiratory Care or Medical Laboratory Technology programs.

The agreements aid Kirtland students by outlining the courses they should take if they wish to transfer to Ferris to earn an associate in applied science degree in either of these two programs. Ferris also offers a path to a certificate in phlebotomy early in the Medical Laboratory Program, which allows students to work as a phlebotomist while they are completing their degree requirements.

Students interested in the Respiratory Care Program would take 28 credits toward their program at Kirtland. Those interested in the medical laboratory technology degree could take approximately 40 credits toward their degree at Kirtland.

Ferris State University, located in Big Rapids, is just one of numerous four-year institutions with which Kirtland is aligned. Students interested in additional information should contact Kirtland's Counseling Office at (989) 275-5000, ext. 280, for an appointment to speak with an adviser.

The Wall Street Journal

August 15, 2006

Where Have All the Welders Gone, As Manufacturing and Repair Boom?

It's a great time to be a welder.

Months before he graduated from the four-year welding-engineering program at Ferris State University, in Big Rapids, Mich., 21-year-old Will Chemin had two offers for jobs paying \$50,000-plus. The one he took, working in Dubuque, Iowa, for Deere & Co., the Moline, Ill., equipment company, pays \$55,500 a year, plus a \$2,500 signing bonus and full relocation coverage. "It takes off a lot of stress during the school year, that's for sure," Mr. Chemin says.

Welding, a dirty and dangerous job, has fallen out of favor over the past two decades, as young skilled laborers pursue cleaner, safer and less physically demanding work.

Now, thanks to a global boom in industrial manufacturing, skilled welders are in greater demand than ever. Companies can't find enough of them.

The Hobart Institute of Welding Technology, in Troy, Ohio, has been inundated, on its Web site and in person, with recruiters. A notice from Liebherr Mining Equipment Co., offers full benefits and education subsidies. The Newport News, Va., company also is offering relocation assistance, something it hasn't done before, says Cort Rieser, vice president of manufacturing.

The company's Newport News plant, which builds 400-ton mining trucks, is running at capacity. "We've gone to all the overtime that everybody can handle," Mr. Rieser says.

"I can't build any faster."

In Casper, Wyo., welders are so vital to J.W. Williams Inc.'s operations making dehydration and compression machinery for the oil and natural-gas industries that the company has begun offering \$1-an-hour bonuses to welders who simply show up for work on time. "We need welders like a starving person needs food," says Hal Connor, the company's human-resources manager.

The welder shortage is part of a broader scarcity of skilled trades-people affecting industries around the world. Ironworkers, machinists, sheet metalworkers, plumbers, pipe fitters and boilermakers are all in demand as production of industrial machinery continues near all-time levels. Some companies are having difficulties getting parts to build ships, bulldozers, rail cars, mining trucks and other industrial goods.

During a recent manufacturing conference in Chicago, Caterpillar Inc. Chairman and Chief Executive Jim Owens said the paucity of welders and other skilled tradesmen was contributing to a production bottleneck at the Peoria, Ill., company. A spokesman says

the problem is occurring in "pockets" and adds, "It has been an ongoing effort to recruit and train welders fairly quickly."

The ranks of welders, brazers and solderers whose jobs all are essentially to join pieces of metal-dropped to 576,000 in 2005, a 10% decline compared with 2,000, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. The American Welding Society, an industry group, predicts that by 2010 demand for skilled welders may outstrip supply by about 200,000.

Welding is a job that isn't easy to automate. Repairs on the nation's aging infrastructure, such as bridges, require judgment calls a robot can't yet make. Some welded products, such as space frames for Formula One race cars, aren't produced in sufficient quantity to justify development of expensive robots.

The average age of welders, currently 54, keeps climbing. As a wave of retirements loom, welding schools and on-site training programs aren't pumping out replacements fast enough. As a result, many companies are going to great lengths to attract skilled welders, sending recruiters to faraway job fairs and dangling unprecedented perks.

The median weekly earnings for welders, solderers and brazers rose more than 17% from 2000 to 2004 to hit \$600, before dipping slightly in 2005 to \$596, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But taking into account premium salaries, bonuses and overtime, experienced and highly-skilled welders and welding engineers can easily collect \$60,000 a year, double the average. Welders in far-flung places, like Canada's Alberta oil sands, or under dangerous conditions, such as on an ocean oil rig, can command more than \$100,000 a year.

Some companies have resorted to outsourcing their welding. Last year, Liebherr, the Virginia mining-equipment company, began contracting out some projects to welding shops in Michigan and Texas. Some firms, unwilling or unable to pay the high rates skilled U.S. welders command, are having their welding done in places like China.

In many cases, Chinese steel mills pour the steel and welding shops there do the work, ranging from simple fabrication of metal supports for concrete pillars to complicated projects, such as making industrial boilers or heat exchangers. In many cases, China remains a cost-effective alternative, even taking into account the cost of transporting finished products via ocean freighter or cargo jet.

Moody International Group, a global supplier of technical training and inspection services, has certified more than 400 people in China to American Welding Society standards since it started a training program in mid-2003, says Todd Fleckenstein, international group director. Moody, based in Houston, says it is the only outfit in China authorized to certify welders to AWS standards.

The shortage is particularly tough on small manufacturers that may lack the resources to keep their welders from jumping to greener pastures. Glenn Eyster Jr., owner of Eyster's

Machine and Wire Products, of Seven Valleys, Pa., lost two of five welders in his 31-person operation over the past two years.

This year, Mr. Eyster raised the starting wage for welders by \$1.50 to around \$17 an hour. The company, which makes wire baskets used in cooking French fries and sterilizing medical equipment, hasn't been able to raise prices enough to recoup the higher labor cost.

"It has directly affected our bottom line," Mr. Eyster says. "Am I getting more work out of them? Not exactly."

At Williams, a unit of Canada's Flint Energy Services Ltd., the Rocky Mountain region's thin labor pool has hindered efforts to train more welders through an on-site training and apprenticeship program. Executives say the company could increase production by 20% to 25% if it had more welders.

Williams has raised its starting wage for welders by 30% over the past two years to \$16 an hour. This year, it sent recruiters to job fairs as far away as Saginaw, Mich., to poach welders from the declining auto industry. Rivals, meanwhile, have been stealing Williams's welders for months, says Mr. Connor, the human resources manager. One of his most experienced welders recently jumped to a rival firm located directly across the street. "It's a fast buck," he says.

Pioneer

August 15, 2006

All Middle East is impacted by battle, prof says

BIG RAPIDS - An United Nations cease-fire has ended - for the time - fierce fighting between Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers and Hezbollah militants in southern Lebanon.

But if there is to be a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors in the Middle East, it will depend on how the international community handles Iran and Syria, says Ferris State University's Vice President for Academic Affairs Michael Harris.

Harris, who has a master's degree from Tel-Aviv University in public policy-public management, says the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah has a large impact on countries beyond the Middle East.

"It affects us, in the manner that the conflict between Israeli forces and Hezbollah is a broader conflict in which Iran is the driving force," he said Monday afternoon. "The Hezbollah and Israel conflict at the border is a manifestation of the directions that the government in Tehran is taking. It means that the government in Iran is becoming a very serious threat to the well-being of world peace."

Harris, who served as a major IDF, explained that Iran's continued development of a nuclear bomb and its long-lasting support and aid for terrorism should alarm and worry people throughout the world.

"These are not guerillas or terrorists in southern Lebanon who are attacking Israel," he said. "It is a reflection of a very dangerous government in place in Iran."

Harris says the cease-fire plan draws more questions than answers.

"This cease-fire is in place to end hostilities, but has significant challenges because it doesn't deal with some fundamental details," he added. "It doesn't go in to detail how Hezbollah will be disarmed, or the ultimate question, what will the U.N. do or what will happen on the ground."

"Hezbollah continues to say it has the right to attack Israel. They have a supply of rockets from Iran and Syria. The resolution does nothing to deal with that supply or other weapons. The resolution does nothing long-term if we don't have disarmament of Hezbollah."

Harris believes the break in the current conflict may lead to more fighting when Hezboallah forces gain enough strength and Iran feels it can use the organization to do its bidding.

"To sustain a long-term cease-fire without conflict primarily depends on the ability of the U.S. to build a world coalition with European countries and Russia and make it clear to the Iranians that the world won't tolerate it anymore," he explained. "If other nations continue to support Iran, then southern Lebanon is only one area this fundamentalism will develop.

The main issue here is will there be enough international pressure on Iran and Syria.

What does Iran want to achieve and how will the international community deal with it?"

Harris believes the conflict would end if Iran and Syria wanted it to.

"If they won't end the fighting, we are not any nearer to a resolution that will last," he said. The current resolution also does not address the return of Israeli soldiers being held, Harris explained.

"At the bottom of all this is Hezbollah going into Israel and taking Israeli soldiers," he said. "The resolution has no time frame for releasing them."

Harris noted that even when there was a "peace" following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, it really wasn't peace.

"For six years Hezbollah has had time to develop and train," he said.

"For six years the international community and Israel did nothing and it has all exploded. It was six years that there wasn't really peace, it was preparation for war."

Harris believes to end the conflict in southern Lebanon for good would mean the international community would need be proactive against Syria and Iran.

"Will people sit quietly until Syria, Iran and Hezbollah thinks it's a good time to fight again?" Harris asked.

The Grand Rapids Press

August 16, 2006

Ferris faculty prepares to strike

Health insurance issues lead to impasse

BIG RAPIDS- Less than two weeks before classes start at Ferris State University, administrators and faculty members are preparing for a strike.

Professors have said they might walk off their jobs if a contract is not in place by Aug. 28.

They have set up a crisis center to organize the walkout and are expected to vote Sunday whether to authorize leaders to call a strike.

Administrators are telling students classes will start Aug. 28, and are setting up schedules for other employees to oversee students in case of a walkout.

Tension has increased in the past weeks as negotiators run out of time. Negotiations do not affect Ferris State's Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids. Instructors there have a contract that expires next summer.

While faculty members will be back to Big Rapids on Monday for class preparation, there will be no "welcome back" speech from Ferris State University President Dave Eisler.

Typically the president meets with the faculty at convocation to welcome them, a tradition that union leaders said has never been broken:

"He walked out on us," said Mike Ryan, president of the Ferris Faculty Association. "It appears they're reacting on the assumption that there will be no contract when class resume. They're anticipating not having a settlement."

But according to Eisler, dwindling attendance was the reason for not "We did not cancel convocation, instead I did not schedule one for this year," he wrote in an e-mail seeking comments. He was unavailable to speak because he is attending a board retreat this week.

"Last year was very lightly attended, and I would prefer an event that includes all of the campus. The day we have used in the past is a busy time when faculty and staff are helping students."

Negotiations between the university's board of trustees and 450 faculty members started in February. The university asked for a state appointed mediator, who meets separately with each negotiating team and carries proposals between them.

The sides failed to agree on a contract after about 20 hours of mediation last weekend, said Shelly Armstrong, associate vice-president for marketing and communications.

The university presented a proposal that would let faculty members choose between a PPO-style union-backed health care plan - a plan used by most area school districts - or two other plans provided by Blue Cross Blue Shield and Priority Health.

The five-year offer includes a 2 percent increase for this year and 2.5 percent increase for the other years.

But union leader Mike Ryan said the offer is inadequate. He said the increases in health care costs, of which professors pay a percentage, have outpaced the increase in salaries in the past five years. He said a 2 percent increase would not cover cost of living increases.

"Basically, you can't take it. There isn't enough to cover meat and potatoes," he said.

Armstrong said she hopes a contract will be in place by Aug. 28 but that the school is prepared if it isn't.

"We plan to continue holding classes. We're telling students to continue with their move-in plans."

The Grand Rapids Press

August 16, 2006

Recruiting scholarship money aimed at leveling conference playing field

BIG RAPIDS - Ferris State football coach Jeff Pierce figures if you can't beat them go out and raise more scholarship money.

Since the end of last year's 3-8 season, Pierce has roamed the country to recruit funds from former Bulldog players, hoping to even the playing field against Great Lakes intercollegiate Athletic Conference powers Saginaw Valley State, Northwood University and defending NCAA Division II national champion Grand Valley State.

For Pierce, a second recruiting season, so to speak, has become a necessity as his program stands in the shadow of Ferris State's Division I hockey program.

"Don't get me wrong, because I love our hockey here," Pierce said. "But because of the hockey team, our scholarship numbers are down compared to programs like Grand Valley's.

"Last year, all of a sudden, you get guys injured and don't have the depth in the program. Now, you're going all the way down to play guys who are going to be good players for you but maybe are a year or two away."

So rather than put players on the field who should be red-shirted and suffer the consequences while trying to survive in what arguably is the strongest conference in small college football, Pierce decided to get reacquainted with Ferris State alumni.

Hockey is Not priority

"I've met with 90 football players who played here to get them to sponsor scholarships and try to get us to the level that other people are at," he said. "I really appreciate the generosity and commitment these guys I coached or played with have made.

"When this season is over, I go back and start banging on doors again."

Pierce, a former Bulldogs defensive back, has 25 scholarships to split amongst his players. By comparison, Grand Valley coach Chuck Martin has the Division II maximum of 36 football scholarships to divvy up.

The disparity has to do with more money being funneled into FSU's hockey program, its facility and its 18 full-ride scholarships.

"Most (Division II) institutions choose to fully fund their football programs, or come close to it. It's our institutional decision to do what is necessary to first keep our

Division I hockey program viable while hoping not to create an environment where it's this program against that program," FSU athletics director Tom Kirinovic said.

"To do what's best for football under our circumstances, we took Jeff's lead and came to the conclusion that we, meaning Jeff and, at times, (associate athletics director) Brian Kegler, had to seek outside funds for football to be competitive again."

He doesn't whine about it

Pierce is the all-time winningest football coach at Ferris State with a 69-52 record over 11 seasons. But he was 22-3 in his first two years and 37-19 in the 1990s.

The Bulldogs are 32-33 this decade, and 1-8 against Grand Valley since '96.

"Some people might perceive this as Jeff moaning and whining because he doesn't think he has enough," Kirinovic said. "But Jeff has never done that. Rather, he's gone out and done what few would spend the time doing while trying to find a solution."

This season, that solution is coming in the form of transfers, including defensive end Kurt Hout from Division IAA Northern Colorado, and wide receiver Robert Miller, defensive backs Patrick Wells and Kyle Williams and Grand Rapids Community College running back Leonard Currie from the junior-college ranks.

"I'm not big on junior-college guys and transfers, but, right now, we need some immediate help from older guys we were able to get with added scholarship money," Pierce said.

The bottom line: Pierce must do whatever is possible to be competitive again.

Especially in the Great Lakes Conference, and particularly when your main nemesis lays claim to three of the past four Division II titles.

Pioneer

August 16, 2006

FSU strike talk continues

FFA negotiator calls the latest Ferris offer given to the faculty bargaining Sunday "divisive."

BIG RAPIDS - Talk of a potential strike is still in the air as Ferris State University continues contract negotiations with the Ferris Faculty Association.

Negotiations to replace the three-year agreement that expired June 30 began in February. At the request of the university and with the agreement of the faculty, both sides began meeting with a mediator July 21.

Tentative agreements have been reached on nine of 21 sections of the contract, as well as concerns on intellectual property and course development. Bargaining teams for both sides met with a mediator Friday, Saturday and Sunday, resulting in a new university offer on salary and benefits.

Since the beginning, a five-year contract has been proposed, with the FFA seeking across-the-board pay increases of 5 percent for each of the five years and fully-funded health insurance. The university is seeking to increase the number of part-time and temporary faculty from 15 percent of the total to 25 percent and proposing alternate insurance plans already in use by other groups of FSU employees.

Late Saturday evening, FFA President Michael Ryan said the faculty presented a plan to the mediator to give to the university.

"I'm going to paraphrase their response," Ryan said. "Basically, they said, 'Are you serious?' -they were doubting the integrity of our offer. They responded with an offer that was not at all acceptable."

Ryan characterized the mediator-discussed offer given to the faculty bargaining team Sunday as "divisive."

"We felt they were not being serious at that point in time and felt we'd probably better go to church, as it was Sunday morning... and that's exactly what we did," Ryan said. "We thanked the mediator for his time and efforts, then went to church."

The university presented a written proposal on salary and benefits to- the FFA's Michigan Education Association representative.

A university press release outlines the Sunday offer on health care and wages.

FFA members will have the choice each of the next five years between two health care options, the first of which includes two Michigan Education Special Services

Association (MESSA) plans, Supercare 1, the faculty's current plan, and Choice II. The second option offers "an array of choices, including Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO plans and Priority Health," the release stated. Faculty members would have a choice to sign up as single people or as a family.

The salary offer, as described in the release, includes "across-the-board competitive increases for each year of the agreement starting with 2 percent this fiscal year and 2.5 percent in each of the remaining four years through fiscal year 2011."

"The university believes that the last economic proposals presented to the FFA bargaining team on Sunday represent significant progress toward addressing the concerns of the faculty and demonstrate the value the university places on the faculty and their work.

We believe that the university's offer is a generous one under the circumstances we are facing," said Thomas R. Cook, secretary of Ferris' Board of Trustees, in a written release. "These economic proposals need to be placed in context of what is happening statewide with the funding of higher education," Cook continued.

"We continue to face declining state support and increases in state-mandated retirement costs, utilities and other costs. It is no surprise that the overall financial environment at Ferris is challenging, and we must find ways to offset these state funding reductions, new state mandates and increased operating expenses."

The health care proposals by the university include bringing the university's contribution for fiscal year 2007, which began July 1, up to the level currently paid for non-bargaining employees who have given up raises in the past in exchange for higher health care contributions, the release said.

The increase would be \$1,127 over the capped contribution for the past fiscal year and represents nearly a full percentage point increase in the compensation package, according to university numbers. FSU also proposed increasing its contribution by 4 percent a year in fiscal years 2008 through 2011.

"The combined effect of these proposals will be to immediately and significantly reduce member out-of-pocket costs in the first year and contain those costs over the life of the five-year agreement," said university spokeswoman Shelly Armstrong, FSU associate vice president for marketing and communications.

Ryan calls the latest proposal "divisive," saying it seeks to separate faculty members on the basis of who would be eligible for market adjustments to make their salary as a professor more in line with what their expertise would bring in the commercial market, on the basis of family versus single insurance and divide new hires from existing faculty on questions such as sick leave.

"I'm disappointed with the action over the weekend," he said. "It seems designed to initiate a divide within the faculty."

He also said the offer was not fair from an economic standpoint because it would result in fewer take-home dollars for faculty members. The university's proposed health care and salary increases would not keep pace with actual insurance increases or inflation, Ryan said.

He called the proposed 2.5-percent salary increase "half the inflation rate."

"The faculty are taking home less now, on average, than five, six years ago," he said, charging the university is not remaining current with health care and wages. "They (FSU) want to balance one against the other - you get a percent raise, but they take out more than that for health care.... It's not a choice between meat and potatoes or dessert - it's a choice between meat or potatoes."

Despite his characterization of the latest offer, Ryan says faculty morale is high and the group "is determined to get a fair and equitable contract" on both economic and non-economic issues.

Pioneer

August 16, 2006

FSU Copy Center has new home

BIG RAPIDS - The Ferris State University Copy Center, which was located at 1124 S. State St., recently moved to a new home at 103 Perry Ave., the former location of the Northwestern Area Credit Union.

The new copy center, located on the corner of State Street and Perry Avenue, is much more conducive to the daily business, said Shelly Armstrong, associate vice president of marketing and communications.

"It has been in the plans for quite a while," she said. "Basically, our campus master plan and called for the removal of the old building, which was nearly 50 years old."

Armstrong noted that there was a deferred maintenance cost of more than \$700,000 for the old building.

"It was not energy efficient, there were issues with maximizing space utilization and it was not handicap accessible," she added.

Armstrong noted the location was purchased upon approval of the FSU Board of Trustees in July 2005. The university took over the location the following month.

She added the removal of the old copy center will allow the creation of additional parking for faculty and staff.

"Right now they are open for business," Armstrong said. "They are still in transition from moving from the old facility to the new facility."

Pioneer

August 16, 2006

Health care options would save faculty money, university

says

BIG RAPIDS - Health care choices offered by Ferris State University to Ferris Faculty Association members in a package Sunday would save individuals money, university officials say.

Under the proposal, FFA members will have the choice each of the next five years between two health care options, the first of which includes two Michigan Education Special Services Association (MESSA) plans, Supercare 1, the faculty's current plan, and Choice II. The second option offers "an array of choices, including Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO plans and Priority Health," a press release from the university stated. Faculty members would have a choice to sign up as single people or as a family.

"Both options provide excellent health care coverage with the added benefit of immediate relief for out-of-pocket member costs," said university spokeswoman Shelly Armstrong, FSU associate vice president for marketing and communications.

If the FFA membership elects health care Option 1, faculty members who select MESSA Choices II single or family coverage will realize an immediate reduction in out-of-pocket costs of \$2,438 per year (nearly \$100 per pay).

If the membership elects Option 2, and a faculty member then chooses the BC/BS PPO 1 plan, the savings will be nearly \$2,000 for families, but significantly greater for singles who will save more than \$5,000 per year (nearly \$200 per pay).

Similarly, for families or singles who elect the Priority Health HMO (also in Option 2), annual savings for out-of-pocket expenses will exceed \$4,000 (approximately \$160 per pay).

"It is important to point out that the FFA membership has the opportunity to choose between Option 1 (MESSA choices) and Option 2 (BC/BS-Priority Health choices) on an annual basis after the initial selection has been determined for 2006-7.

Regardless of the health coverage option elected, each member will have more health care options available to choose from than is the case under the current agreement," Armstrong said.

FFA President Michael Ryan listed the faculty's issues with some of the choices offered.

"We have concerns about their offer of Blue Cross/Blue Shield Community Blue," he said.

Ryan contends the university is "characterizing" the Blue Cross/Blue Shield offering as an insurance plan through the company when it is really a self-funded plan by the university.

He said it is technically not health insurance subject to state and federal regulation, but rather a liability plan and any appeals of what the insurance would or would not cover would go to Ferris administration.

"Basically, we're giving money back to the employer," he said, adding Ferris would set the fees, choose the prescription drugs covered and the co-pay amounts; as well as adjust those at any time.

He compared it to a "company store in a coal mine, where they set the price of bread and can change it at any time."

The Daily Telegram (Tecumseh, MI)

August 16, 2006

Dual enrollment art program continued

Some Tecumseh school board members expressed concern about the cost of the program, with two of the six present voting against renewing it.

TECUMSEH - High-performing art students will again be able to take dual-enrollment classes in Tecumseh after the school board extended the program for one year.

However, some board members expressed concern about the cost of the program, with two of the six present voting against renewing it. Some board members would prefer to charge the Kendall School of Art and Design at Ferris State University in Big Rapids a fee for using the high school's art facilities.

"It's a good program, but it's our equipment that's being used and we're getting nothing for wear and tear," said board president Mark Wolfe, who voted with trustee Jody Manes against renewing the program.

Wolfe said the costs for offering the program were more than expected when the board approved a one-semester trial in October, and would increase if more students enroll.

"I'm definitely not against the program," Manes said. "I was a little bit concerned about the money for the number of students and whether we really were exploring all the options for a dual enrollment program."

"(To a) lot of organizations that use our facilities we charge usage fees," trustee Dan Gunder said. "It seems like this would be in line with that. ... As a school board we're trying to balance the budget."

Wolfe said trustee Debbie Johnson-Berges, who was absent for the discussion and vote, had expressed concerns about the cost to him. The renewal still would have been approved if Johnson-Berges had voted against it.

Tecumseh was one of six districts in the state last school year selected by the Kendall school to offer dual-enrollment art classes. Students receive college credit, which may be applied at Kendall or other schools. Tecumseh offered two freshman-level classes during the winter semester, with six students taking each class.

The students paid \$125 each, with the district paying the balance of the cost to Kendall. Superintendent Mike McArar said the district paid \$4,295 to Kendall.

The classes are taught after school by Tecumseh High School art teachers Ron Frenzen and Vicky Isley, who are paid a salary by Kendall and considered adjunct professors.

Trustee Matt Oren agreed that the board should be fiscally responsible, but said there are other considerations that should go into whether to offer the program.

"Are we doing it in the best interest of our students?" he asked. He said the district did not charge a usage fee to Kendall because the program directly benefits students, no other district charges a fee to Kendall, and Kendall would not have the program in Tecumseh if it were charged a fee.

"(The other school districts) felt it was a benefit (to them) and they didn't charge," finance director Karen Donahue said.

Oren said this is also a way to promote the district.

"We're putting forth a minimum amount of money for maximum exposure in the county," he said.

The program is open to students from any school district. Isley said two of the 12 students in the program last school year were from outside Tecumseh and that the program could entice students to enroll at Tecumseh through the schools of choice law.

"It's a plus that our school was recognized as one of the best art high schools in the state," Isley said.

Dual-enrollment is also preferable to advanced placement classes, Isley said. In an AP art class, students prepare a portfolio of work that is judged. The student may or may not receive college credit, despite paying to take the AP class.

"In dual-enrollment, the students have a much better chance of receiving college credit than going through the AP board," Isley said. All 12 students last year received credit, she said, while the year before when Tecumseh had an AP art class about half of the 13 students received a score that would lead to credit at some colleges.

Isley said after the board voted that she understands the board's concerns, but that the program is a "tremendous opportunity for our students."

She said that being able to offer the program in both semesters this year could help increase enrollment.

Pioneer

August 17, 2006

FSU convocation cancelled

FFA president questions if cancellation is related to contract negotiations.
BIG RAPIDS -The Ferris Faculty Association is questioning why Ferris State University will not hold a convocation ceremony this year.

FFA President Michael Ryan wonders if convocation was called off in anticipation of problems stemming from ongoing contract negotiations with faculty. The FFA is currently negotiating a new contract with FSU following the expiration of the previous agreement June 30.

Negotiations have been in mediation since July 21, and Ryan has said the FFA will not return to work without a contract.

University officials characterize the event as an informal gathering, "closer to an in-service day" than a traditional, robed faculty procession-style ceremony, said Marc Sheehan, editorial services coordinator at FSU.

Ferris officials say the decision to cancel was based on a lack of participation from the entire campus community.

"Also, it was determined that with faculty negotiations under way, our energies should be focused on reaching an agreement and all the preparations required for the arrival of our new and continuing students. There are already a number of activities being planned for the first couple weeks of school so there are plenty of opportunities for the university community to come together and celebrate the new academic year," said Shelly Armstrong, associate vice president for marketing and communications.

Last year's agenda included a welcome from the university president, comments from the Academic Senate president and academic affairs Vice president and the introduction of new staff by various vice presidents, she added.

Ryan said the faculty hadn't been given an official announcement regarding the event's cancellation. Rather, "it was just not scheduled" he said, although he noted it had been on an earlier tentative schedule of events. "The president (FSU President David Eisler) made a surprise move when he canceled his convocation address," Ryan said. "That's the kick-off for the school year." Ryan speculated it may have been "foreshadowing" that the faculty would not accept the latest university offer, presented Sunday.

He noted in the last negotiation cycle during a convocation address by Eisler's predecessor, William Sederburg, the faculty walked out.

"(Canceling convocation) seems to me to be a pre-emptive response on their part, like they're anticipating faculty action, anticipating there will be no contract at that point."

The Grand Rapids Press

August 17, 2006

Force semi-pro team hosts football camp

WYOMING -- As a child, Justin Sherrod remembers spending many a day at the South Kent Recreation Association complex sharpening his football skills.

The former Wyoming Park standout eventually took those skills to Ferris State University and then to the semipro level, playing first for the Grand Rapids Thunder and now for the West Michigan Force.

On Saturday, Sherrod and the other players put on a youth football camp at the SKRA headquarters, located on Gezon Parkway between Burlingame and Byron Center.

"I like this a lot," Sherrod said. "It's a good group of guys. It's more like a unit, comparing to separate players battling against each other in practice all of the time."

Sherrod and other players left the Thunder, which reached the Minor League Football Association championship game, in favor of a spot in the Mid-Continental Football League.

The Force has jumped out to an explosive 6-0 start, highlighted by offensive romps over Bolingbrook and Indiana. The Force won those respective games, 70-0 and 45-0.

"I kind of knew some of the guys we were getting," Sherrod said. "It made me think we had a chance to be really good. The Thunder are still winning with their players, but we ended up with a bunch of solid guys too."

Sherrod and the other players spent Saturday afternoon signing autographs for the kids, after a session where they took them through passing, running, blocking and other drills.

"This is the first time we put on a camp like this," said Ted Serama, who is the head coach and also serves as an offensive lineman. "I really was surprised at how well the team camp turned out."

Sherrod believes the camp was a success, with more than 100 participants involved.

"We tried to get the major points of football technique addressed here, and the kids loved getting together with the other kids and seeing the Force players in action."

Detroit Free Press

August 17, 2006

Ferris State decides not to schedule convocation

BIG RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) -- There will be no convocation this year at Ferris State University because the school and its faculty union, which have been without a collective bargaining agreement since June 30, have not yet worked out a new labor contract.

The purpose, tenor and timing of convocations vary from school to school. At Ferris State, they generally are informal meet-and-greet sessions involving administrators, instructors and support staff that unofficially kick off a new school year.

Ferris State's convocations usually take place a few days before the start of the fall semester, which this year begins Aug. 28. Students and the public are encouraged to attend but rarely do, university spokesman Marc Sheehan said Thursday.

Last year's event included a welcome from university President David L. Eisler, comments from other campus leaders and the introduction of new staff members, school spokeswoman Shelly Armstrong told the Pioneer.

Ongoing contract talks between the university and the Ferris Faculty Association were behind the decision not to schedule a convocation before the 2006-07 school year. The unresolved issues include pay and health insurance, Sheehan said.

Contract talks started in February on a proposed five-year agreement to replace the three-year deal that ended up expiring in June. A state-appointed mediator became involved in the negotiations on July 21.

Michael Ryan, the union's president, has said the FFA's members will not return to work without a contract.

Pioneer

August 19 & 20, 2006

WSCC, FSU offer degree on, West Shore campus

SCOTTVILLE - West Shore Community College has signed articulation agreements with Ferris State University which will assist students who wish to transfer into Ferris' business administration program. The agreements aid former and current West Shore students by outlining the courses they should take if they wish to transfer to Ferris to earn a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration.

The major in business administration professional track is designed to prepare individuals for the rapidly changing nature of the work environment in business, government and other nonprofit organizations. The program, which can be taken entirely on the WSCC campus through classroom or online coursework, is designed to equip graduates not only for entry-level positions but for advancement as well.

"Building upon a core of business courses, the program features a tight sequence of major courses, however, the program also provides the flexibility to specialize in an area of interest for the student," said Dr. Amy Wojciechowski, WSCC professor of business studies, who helped design the program.

"Students who are seeking or already have an associate's degree will find the program attractive for building a solid knowledge of business and management. The best part is the degree can be taken entirely on the West Shore campus saving a long drive to Ferris."

Students interested in the ' business administration program would take approximately 85-86 credits toward their program at WSCC and 30 FSU credits to earn the degree. To be admitted to this program, students must have an associate's degree with at least 24 semester credit hours of occupational specialty courses and an overall grade-point average of 2.0 or better.

Pioneer

August 19 & 20, 2006

FFA members authorize strike

Ferris Faculty Association votes to give bargaining team permission to call a strike. BIG RAPIDS - The Ferris Faculty Association's view of contract talks became clear when members voted to authorize the bargaining team to call a strike at a general membership meeting Sunday afternoon.

Ferris State University classes are scheduled to begin Aug. 28, but without the 400-some members of the FFA, it could be a very different start to the semester than students expect. Dorms open Wednesday, and while some students are in town today, many more will be arriving mid-week.

More than half of the FFA's members were in attendance Sunday when the vote to authorize a strike was cast, said Michael Ryan, FFA president.

"Ninety-two percent (of those in attendances) were in favor of authorizing the bargaining team to call a strike on the basis of unfair labor practices exercised by the representatives of the (FSC) Board of Trustees," Ryan said. "The goal in all of this is to get a fair and equitable contract. What the faculty are saying today is they don't want to strike, but they will. After six months of negotiations, the faculty are in no mood to go to work without a contract."

The move comes as no surprise on the other side of the table.

"It's a pretty standard bargaining tactic," said Marc Sheehan, editorial services coordinator at FSU, speaking on behalf of the university Sunday evening. "The more important part is after (Sunday's negotiations) we are cautiously optimistic."

Still, the university is working on plans to carry forward in the event of a strike.

"We have a plan in place, but the general assumption is the semester will begin as scheduled the 28th", Sheehan said. Should there be any work stoppage, the university's expectation is it will be short in duration and would not have an impact on our students getting their degrees from the university."

Calls seeking comment from FSU President David Eisler were not returned as of press time. Sunday; the FFA's Michigan Education Association representative met with the mediator and a representative of the university, Ryan said. At that meeting, the faculty presented a new offer including 4 percent pay increases each of the next five years and health care costs ' covered go percent by the university and 10 percent by the individuals, he said.

"We gave them a complete package," Ryan said, adding the FFA believes the new offer has professors sharing the risk of increasing health care costs. "We look forward to a favorable response from the university."

Both sides will next meet with the mediator Saturday. Another FFA general membership meeting is scheduled for Aug. 27, at which time Ryan expects to bring the members up-to-date on negotiations and, if necessary, reauthorize the strike vote.

At issue in the negotiations, for a five-year contract to replace the three-year agreement which expired June 30, are salary and health care coverage, as well as a number of what Ryan terms "non-economic issues" - matters of discipline, due process and post-tenure recommendations. The two sides have been meeting since February and a mediator became involved in the negotiations July 21.

The university is seeking to increase the number of part-time and temporary faculty from 15 percent of the total to 25 percent and proposing alternate insurance plans, in use by other groups of FSU employees. The university's latest salary offer includes across-the-board increases for each year of the agreement, starting with 2 percent this fiscal year and 2.5 percent each of the remaining four years.

This isn't the first time the FFA has voted to strike. Past negotiations between the FFA and the university have been stormy; terms of the current contract, negotiated in 2002, went back and forth for several months before agreement was reached.

In 2002, FFA members conducted informational picketing and there was talk of a strike.

The last strike occurred in 1997 and lasted four and a half days.