Board Presentation

One of the first things I did when I began this job in 2007 was to visit with colleagues in each of the colleges. My desire was to introduce myself to some people, reintroduce myself to others, and to engage all in discussions about the University's future as it regards to diversity and inclusion. At one of those meetings a colleague said, "Diversity is a left wing plot—and as a philosophical concept it contains within itself the roots of its own demise." His comments did not trouble me—diversity, after all, is not about us agreeing; rather, it is often about disagreements, and finding ways to disagree in civil ways. I do not remember my exact words to him, but it was something like this:

> "How would you like to work at a university where a solid, even superior, education was had by students from all backgrounds—those with large sums of money and those with little money; people from large urban cities and people from small towns; people with strong religious beliefs and people who do not believe there is a God; recent immigrants, not-so-recent immigrants and the people here when the immigrants began to come; people who run fast, and people in wheelchairs; people from the left and people from the right—all these people and others?" I added, "If this is the type of university where you want to work, then help us create it. Help us create a university where people from many backgrounds not only feel welcome— they believe that the University belongs to them as much as it belongs to anyone."

That exchange occurred more than a decade ago. I sometimes wonder how I might answer his challenge today. I might, for example, answer him with the demographics argument in support of diversity—"The nation is changing ethnically and racially and the University must reflect the new demographics." Or I might use the business defense that I hear in many conferences, something along these lines, "Teams of mixed ethnicity, gender, physical ability, age and sexual orientation are more representative of the people we serve. A diverse team may offer a multiplicity of viewpoints and a wider range of experiences, which improves decision-making and problem-solving." I could even make a moral argument, in short, building a diverse institution, in a diverse society, is simply the right thing to do. Those are reasonable arguments, but I would likely take a different approach.

We did not create Ferris, we inherited it. We can, and have built upon the existing foundation; however, we should never get too far removed from the simple truth that the University was here before we were here.

What did we inherit?

Those early classes of Ferris students included many, likely mostly, poor students. And, it is not inconsequential that those classes included women, many women. That is not all. International students attended Ferris in the 1890s, and there were African Americans enrolled in the first decades of the 1900s. I doubt if Woodbridge Ferris ever used the word diversity—he certainly did not use it the way we do today—but the institution that he envisioned, the one that he created, was, to use his words, "thoroughly democratic … a school for all people, regardless of race or station." That is the Ferris that our founder envisioned—one of his ways to "make the world better." That is the Ferris that we inherited.

So, how are we doing?

Ferris State University is not the same institution that it was in 2007. Diversity is today one of the University's core values, and it is central to much of our daily work. Not to sound immodest, but we are doing good work, inclusive work. One would be hard-pressed to find an institution our size that offers more diversity and inclusion related programming—events such as ethnic festivals and sensitivity trainings, in addition to campus-wide discussions on difficult topics like racism, sexism, classism and homophobia. There are several prayer/reflection rooms on campus. A new LGBTQ+ Resource Center is soon to open. Public speakers from many camps come to campus, without incident. An increasing number of faculty have redesigned their courses to infuse diversity and inclusion related pedagogy. We have taken actions to help students who struggle financially, most notably, increasing financial assistance to those students. We are committed to ensuring the success of students who suffer food and housing insecurity. We have partnered with the Wesley House to create an Emergency Food Pantry for our students. The First Lady's Attic has given out thousands of items of clothing. We work closely with students who have aged out of foster care. Of these things, we are proud. This is work consistent with our core values.

But we aspire to be more, to do more to address significant challenges: a decline in International students, significant achievement gaps, a workforce that is not as diverse as most of our sister institutions—and, periodically, incidents of incivility surrounding issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and political

beliefs. And, we must address these challenges even as the University faces budgetary constraints and restraints.

Time is neutral. It is folly to believe that any situation is improved just because time passes. The truth is this: Our actions or inactions determine the future. In that sense the future is not uncertain. We can build the future that we want to see. Woodbridge Ferris built this institution during the Jim Crow period, and he was challenged by the prevailing attitudes and behaviors of that time; nevertheless, his commitment to education for all people—and advocacy for marginalized groups—never wavered. That was his legacy; it is our mandate.