Inaugural Speech
"We Shall Not Live in Vain"

David L. Eisler
October 2, 2003
Williams Auditorium

Thank you Mr. Parsons and members of the Board of Trustees for those inspiring words and charge. Thank you Ferris State University and artist Phil Carrizini for this beautiful medallion. Thank you choir for the wonderful anthem. Those words of Emily Dickinson in our anthem have always held special meaning for me -

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;

It is truly humbling to stand before you today, honored both by your presence and support as we come together to honor our past, celebrate the present, and forge a new future for a wonderful institution, Ferris State University.

Anyone blessed to be president of Ferris State University walks in the footsteps of those who have paved the way. Generations of faculty, staff, and students have worked together to create the university we honor today. I want to begin by thanking the presidents who have preceded me, who each in their own way did everything they could to move Ferris State University forward and to leave it a much better place. I would like to express my personal thanks and appreciation to my predecessor, Dr. Bill Sederburg, who did so much to make this the vibrant campus it is today. We are fortunate to have Presidents Helen Popovich and Robert Ewegeleben with us today. I would ask that they stand so we can acknowledge them with our applause. Thank you so much.

The Past

We are a part of a heritage that stretches back to our founder, Woodbridge Ferris. He moved to Big Rapids in 1884, seeking to build an "opportunity school" for lumberjacks, miners, farm children, and factory workers. For me Woodbridge Ferris represents an enduring symbol of vision, character, integrity, and leadership.

Ferris was joined in this enterprise by his wife, Helen, whose 150th birthday we celebrated this past month. Leaving as important a legacy as her husband, Helen Ferris symbolizes one of the greatest strengths of our university, the caring commitment of our people. She represents thousands of our faculty and staff who have dedicated their lives to helping students. I am reminded of the poignant words of Woodbridge Ferris, who described Helen in this way.

If there is a teacher of teachers at the Ferris Institute...
It is Helen Ferris
The Present

It is this legacy of vision and commitment that we both honor and celebrate today. Over the past 120 years we have grown from that original institute of fifteen students to a regional comprehensive university of nearly 12,000 students. We provide over 120 programs in allied health, applied science, business, optometry, pharmacy, technology, and the liberal arts and offer associate through doctoral degrees. Beyond Big Rapids, we now include the Kendall College of Art and Design, substantial offerings in Grand Rapids, Traverse City, and Flint, and programs in Dearborn, Dowagiac, Gaylord, Jackson, Lansing, Midland, Muskegon, Niles, Petoskey, and Winnipeg, Canada. In doing so we have held true to the vision of our founder, providing educational opportunities for thousands of students. Beyond that, we have created exemplary programs of student support. I believe the goal Ferris intended for his institution was always much more than the opportunity of education. Far beyond access to education, Mr. Ferris wanted students to succeed in that educational process, preparing them for successful careers and meaningful lives.

This is an extraordinary time for Ferris State University. We gather today at a reinvigorated university, with buildings and a campus that are among the finest and most beautiful anywhere in the country. We have a faculty and staff second to none, who are truly committed to student success. And let there be no doubt about this, the success and strength of our University flow directly from the excellence of our people, their pride in our institution, and the extraordinary efforts they make every day.

This fall we experienced the second greatest enrollment growth in our history, proof positive of the need and demand for the Ferris degree. Our educational model, built around faculty student interaction in small classes, combined with connections to the real world, is one that other institutions seek to emulate. Our ability to help students succeed is an educational process that truly changes lives. These are achievements of which we should be extraordinarily proud.

The Future

In my conversations with you, many have spoken with great excitement and expectation for our future. On more than one occasion I have heard Ferris described as a university on the cusp of greatness. I too, believe Ferris is currently positioned to enter a new era of opportunity. What then of our future? Today I suggest five ideas for your consideration. However, in doing so I commit myself to a process where collaboratively we will develop a blueprint for our future that is much more than my vision, it is our vision.

1) **Develop A Learning University** - My dream is that Ferris State University will come to be known as a learning university, one that continually learns from and improves on its efforts. In this way each class, each week, semester, and year is not a repetition of the one before, but rather is based on what has been learned from previous efforts. From study of prior experience we will learn, grow, and improve. Our goal should be a university-wide commitment where each year's graduates are better prepared than those from the previous year. For me this is the hallmark of a learning institution.
2) **Build on the Traditional Strengths of Ferris** - We will find ways to embrace the vision of our founder to promote the diversity of our people through access and support for others. We will be first and foremost a student-centered institution, a university that dedicates its talents and resources to that goal. One of our great strengths is our blend of technical and professional programs. There is no one in our state with this program mix or who has been able to design traditional degree programs in such a way that they cut across disciplines and uniquely prepare students for careers and graduate study. I believe strongly that the foundation for these programs is in traditional academic areas. Throughout their lives, our students will change careers and must be prepared to be lifelong learners, to have learned how to learn. As I tell our students, we are preparing them for a career that may not yet have been invented.

3) **Provide Access to Ferris** - The strength and power of the Ferris degree are precisely what Michigan needs during these trying economic times. We must proactively and aggressively find ways for students throughout the state to access the unique education we provide. Fortunately we live at a time when this is more possible than ever before. I believe education is currently undergoing the biggest change since the invention of movable type. Just as this technology in the 15th century made books available to the developing middle class, today's Internet can free new demographics of learners from educational opportunity limited by time and place considerations. We must and will use online learning to help us become even better partners with schools, technical centers, and community colleges. Drawing upon the excellence of our education, the pedagogical strengths of our faculty, and our commitment to students, Ferris State University will be a national leader in this field.

4) **Recognize the Quality of the Ferris Experience** - We must redouble our efforts to foster broad public recognition for the excellence of an education at Ferris State University. In my mind the education we provide at Ferris not merely equals, but far exceeds what a student will find at institutions focused on research rather than instruction. For me there is no logic that can explain how education provided in lecture settings of 200, 300, 400, or even 500 students and that relies heavily on graduate assistants can ever be considered the equal of the education we provide in reasonably-sized class settings, taught by faculty professionals who are experts in their field. This is the Ferris experience.

5) **Build the Resource Base for Ferris** - We must all work together to create private and public support for Ferris State University. This will require building a strong network of alumni, donor, federal, foundation, and state support. Failure to do so will mean that we will not be able to provide the opportunity our founder so cherished. Plainly and simply students cannot benefit from an education they cannot afford. This wide-ranging effort will first begin with each of us.

**A Life Not Lived in Vain**

In considering the future of Ferris State University I find myself continually drawn to the legacy provided by our founder, Woodbridge Ferris. In an early catalog he describes the school in this fashion.

*The purpose of the Ferris Industrial School is to make the world better.*
Here at Ferris we have an extraordinary opportunity. We work daily with bright, talented, idealistic students and through these interactions are able to help shape and guide lives as they discover their future. Over my nearly thirty years in academia I have come to passionately believe that the ultimate measure of our efforts is not what each of us receives, but rather what we give. As a teacher my greatest satisfaction comes not in my achievements, but instead in those of my students. This is a feeling of pride that is beyond description. Perhaps Emily Dickinson said it best.

If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.

For the next few moments I would encourage each of you to look back on your life and career and to reflect on those who have helped you. In doing so, we realize how much we have depended upon those who have taught, mentored, and gone far beyond expectations to help us succeed. For me these people are the truest representation of a life not lived in vain. I am fortunate to have some of those people with me today.

Dr. John Mohler was my major professor at the University of Michigan and taught a young headstrong pupil that there was much to learn about the clarinet and about life. Thank you Dr. Mohler.

Dr. John M. Long is one of two great mentors in my life. When I was twenty-three with a masters degree and no experience, he gave me my first college teaching opportunity. It was the greatest privilege to work with him for fifteen years. Although I did not realize it at the time, he continually challenged me, giving me ever-greater responsibilities and preparing me for a future I did not even imagine. It was he who first believed that I would and should be a college president and encouraged me to pursue this path. Few days go by when I do not find myself relying on his principles of fairness, good judgment, commitment to communication, and common sense. More than that he taught me about people and human nature through lessons I will never forget. Thank you so much John and Mary Lynne for the difference you have made in our lives.

I’d like to ask my wife, Patsy, to join me at the lectern. For over thirty years she has been my best friend, supporter and lifelong partner. She has always given far more than she ever received.

On this special day Patsy and I want to pause and thank our parents. If the measure of caring and compassion in education and in life is how much one gives back, they gave more than any others ever could. In our family my brother and I always came first. I have learned about my first Christmas from pictures in our family album. I am told that my mother needed a winter coat that year. Instead I received a shiny new American Flyer train set. It was always my parents' goal that my brother and I attend college. I remember my mother going to work at Sears so that my parents could afford to send me to the University of Michigan. This pattern of priority and self-sacrifice permeated our home and shaped my life.
Patsy: At a time when few people did so, my mother and father reached out to me, adopting me into their family. They took a spindly, sick infant and loved me as their own. In our family they read to me and encouraged me, helping me to overcome dyslexia, a challenge I did not know I had. In high school when others told me I wouldn't make it to the University of Michigan, they believed in and supported me. They created a rich, wonderful life and helped me achieve my dream of becoming a teacher.

While we can never repay what you have done for us, we will use your example to give back to others. Today we are proud to announce that through our gifts we have created two annual full tuition scholarships at Ferris State University in your honor.

Dave: Mother and Dad, our daughter Heather is presenting you with a certificate that represents the establishment of the Jacob and Sarah Eisler Scholarship.

Patsy: Mom, Lindsay is presenting you a certificate that represents the establishment of the Norris and Irene Johnson Scholarship. Although Dad is not with us I know he is proud.

For us this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to say thank you. We believe strongly in the concept of giving back and hope that others will join us in making a difference for our students, providing the opportunity for them to receive the lifelong benefit a Ferris education can provide. We truly believe as Gandhi did,

We must be the change we wish to see.

Concluding Thoughts

In closing I want to acknowledge the work of our inaugural committee. My request of them was that this inauguration not be events centered on me, but rather an opportunity for our entire campus community to be involved. I believe they have achieved this magnificently and I would ask that the committee stand to be recognized.

I am hopeful you can join us for a desert reception immediately following this ceremony in the Dome Room of the Rankin Building. You are also invited to a community reception downtown at 3:00 and our progressive supper, which begins at 5:00 in the Westview Dining Center.

Thank you so much for being here and sharing this moment with our university. Patsy and I want each of you to know how happy we are to be at Ferris State University and how much we enjoy the Big Rapids community. We are truly delighted to be here and thank each of you for your welcome and many, many acts of kind hospitality.

In this period of transition the tendency is to focus on the president. Over the past three months I have learned that transition really involves each of us in some way. In closing I offer these thoughts.
Once in a while, something comes along
that marks a moment we remember as having forever changed our life...
...a door opens, we walk through
and when we turn and look back for that same opening, it no longer exists.
We become different

Ferris State University is an extraordinary opportunity, an institution with a wonderful heritage and exciting future. I am honored and humbled to be a part of this great university and look forward to what we can accomplish together for Ferris. For together I believe we can and will create a truly extraordinary university of the future.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to serve
as your president.