Voices, Values, and Vision
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. This marks my 31st day at Ferris State University, a time that for me has been filled with activity, excitement, and a growing great respect for this wonderful university, its people and programs. I want to use this opportunity to share with you some of the voices I’ve heard, values I believe are important, and thoughts on a vision for our future.

Voices

For the first six weeks my approach has been to Listen and Learn. The 20th century baseball catcher and philosopher, Yogi Berra, summed it up in this way.

You can observe a lot just by watching...

During these first six weeks, Patsy and I have met many, many people who have warmly and kindly welcomed us to the university and community. Each of the vice presidents has taken time to walk me through their areas to meet people and get a feeling for our facilities. My plan has been to tour each building on this campus and to meet the people working over the summer. Externally I have met the leaders of this community, talked with donors and supporters of our university, spent time with the political leaders of this area, and begun the process of meeting our alumni.

What I have consistently heard is a strong commitment to this university, the difference Ferris State University makes for Michigan, and the powerful impact our education can have for a person’s future. Faculty and staff alike talk with pride about their work with our students. Over and over I have heard from people who believe their work makes a difference and who take great pride in our university. Although my entire career has been in higher education, I have never worked with a group of people who are so willing to demonstrate their commitment to a university. I’ve been astonished and pleased by the number of people who wear our logo on their lapel or who have a shirt with their department or area embroidered upon it. It has been inspiring to hear your respect and awareness for the heritage of Ferris and your hopes for its future.

Getting to know you is a very important part of listening and learning. People perceive universities in many ways – education, facilities, athletics, and events. In many ways this is true. However in my nearly 30 years in higher education I have come to know that ultimately higher education is really about people. The people who work here and the students who attend here are the major reasons we exist.
Values

While there is still much for me to learn about you and Ferris State University, I want to share some values I believe should be at the core of our university.

**Learning Institution** - I am hopeful that we will come to think of Ferris as a learning institution. Just what does this mean? Certainly most everyone associated with higher education believes they have expertise in learning. For me this concept goes much deeper. I perceive a learning institution to be a university that continually learns and improves from 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 learn, grow, and improve. Our goal should be more than to take students through an experience from which they graduate prepared for future success. It needs to be a university-wide commitment where we seek to have each year’s graduates better prepared than those who graduated the previous year. For me this is a learning institution.

**Respect for Colleagues** - This is my 29th fall in academia. Based on this experience I am certain that as a university community we will deal with issues that may and can divide us into fractious disagreement. These may be differences among professional, technical and traditional academic disciplines, questions of governance and administration, personnel issues involving colleagues, funding levels in a time of limited resources, or reactions to the current events of the day. The academy is based on discourse and as students we are taught to question, explore, and learn. I believe that it is in these times of discord and disagreement that we are tested. Through this testing a better, stronger university is forged. However just as strongly I believe that while we may disagree, these occasions should never transcend our respect for each other as friends, colleagues, and as members of a community committed to a greater good. When we agree to disagree, each of us must not lose sight of our respect for the other.

**Equality** - I believe in a university where each person, whether faculty, staff, or student, is equal. It is far too easy for each of us to cling to symbols of status that seek to separate us from others. What each of us does is important and contributes to the success of our students. A true university does not separate itself into classes of people divided by function, background or preparation, but instead looks to the impact our combined efforts can make for our students.

**We Empower Others** – What then is our purpose? I am reminded of the words of the late Martin Luther King, who asked,

*Life's most persistent and urgent question is:*

*What are you doing for others?*
This summer I had the opportunity to attend a new president’s retreat where they asked each of us what we believe is most important. For me this answer was both clear and challenging. I believe my role is to empower others to do what is best for our students and university. This concept of empowering others means that I share this presidency. What we can accomplish as a university will be very limited if it depends upon my actions. Instead it should and will be built upon the combined strengths of our efforts. It is a concept that I am hopeful we can embed throughout the university. Frequently it involves asking, “How may I help you?”

In reflecting upon this opportunity at Ferris I have fond myself returning to the thoughts of Robert Greenleaf, a 20th century essayist who some consider in the tradition of Emerson. The core of his message can be summed in a simple statement.

The leader is first a servant...

In this spirit I believe strongly that what you do and the contributions you make are much more important than my own.

Expectations

What should your expectations be for me as your president? My family will tell you that one of my favorite movies is Dave, a film from 1993 that featured Kevin Kline as a man who was an exact double for the President of the United States. Called to substitute for the President at an event, he finds himself serving as president when the original is incapacitated. Some in our family believe I’m attracted to this movie because of the title. While that may be true, I’ve always found it contained practical leadership advice. Dave offers these thoughts about expectations for a president –

I ought to care more about you than I do about me.
I ought to care more about what’s right than what’s popular.

I believe those are expectations you should have for me as your president.

Share Information - Over time I am hopeful you will find that I share information. Through white papers, letters to campus, our website, and through interactions together I plan to keep you keep you informed of our challenges, plans, progress, and successes. One example of this is with the presidents council, a weekly meeting I hold with vice presidents. A summary of the discussions from this group will be accessible from the president’s website.

Be Accessible – I hope you will also find that I’m accessible. As part of our website we’ve created an electronic suggestion box. This is designed so you can submit your comments, suggestions, and criticisms both electronically and anonymously. During the fall semester
we’ll begin a process by which I hope to visit with every faculty and staff member. I want to hear your experiences and thoughts on Ferris. Finally we’ve designated open times in our office schedule when you may show up without an appointment. These open hours will be announced in the campus-wide notices.

**Make Difficult Decisions** – I believe you will find that as an institution we will be willing to make hard decisions. These are decisions that at times will be unpopular. However, my experience is that avoiding difficult decisions only makes them more so in the future. We will proactively move forward and in this process adapt both to the present and future. One of the questions we must address together is how in a time of reduced resources we can continue to both grow and improve.

**Vision**

What then is our Vision for the Future? For me it feels far too presumptuous and limiting to even suggest that thirty days is a period in which any person can assimilate the collective history, hopes, and fears of an entire institution and produce a cohesive picture of its future. Perhaps more importantly, even if one were to do so, it would still only be the thoughts of just one person. I believe strongly our vision is something developed collaboratively. This we will create interactively together, evolving our vision to meet the challenges of the present and future. The following are what I believe will be some components of this vision.

**Build on Traditional Strengths** - For our future we will build on the unique strengths of Ferris. There is no one in this state who has our unique blend of technical and professional programs. Further I know of few institutions that have been able to design traditional degree programs in such a way that they cut across disciplines and uniquely prepare students for careers.

**Recognize the Quality of the Ferris Experience** - I believe strongly that we should foster public acceptance and recognition for the unique qualities of an education at Ferris State University. In my mind the education we can and will provide at Ferris not merely equals, but exceeds what a student will find at a research I or research I “wannabe” institution. 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 an education provided in reasonably-sized class settings and taught by faculty professionals who are experts in their field.

**Be an Economic Driver for Michigan** - Because of the unique nature of its programs Ferris will be an economic driver for the state of Michigan both for the present and future. We provide education that works, an education that helps students “unleash their potential.” To become an economic driver we must find a way to leverage our unique program mix, strong commitment to personalized instruction, and technological expertise to make our
programs accessible where and when they are needed. In this process I believe Ferris State University can and should be a technology leader for our state.

**Be Prepared for Change** - As an institution we can choose to act or react. I believe that a learning institution with a shared vision for the future can proactively create its future, rather than react to the forces around. Surely and most certainly this will involve change. Over time I have learned the wisdom in this statement -

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People don't mind change,
They just don't want to be changed...
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The nature of the past few months was such that it did not include much opportunity to see summer movies. As a result I did not view the sequel to the Matrix. In thinking of a vision for the future, I am reminded of the original Matrix. You may recall that the movie closes with a soliloquy by Neo, the protagonist identified by Morpheus as “The One.”

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I don't know the future.
I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end.
I came here to tell you how it's going to begin.
I'm going to show you a world without boundaries.
A world where everything is possible.
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This paraphrase of his words seems appropriate to me as we look to the future. It is a future I embrace with both excitement and anticipation.

**The Present**

The needs of our university cannot wait while we learn how to work with each other. Let me take a few moments to address immediate issues.

**Searches** - There are several important leadership positions that we need to fill. The most pressing of these is the vacancy for a chief academic officer. We will begin immediately the search for a new vice president of academic affairs. Based on campus feedback on his efforts during the presidential search, it is my intent to seek the assistance of Jim Applebury with the search. We will delay other administrative searches until the Vice President of Academic Affairs search is concluded. During this period we will fill the vacancy in University Advancement and Marketing with Dr. Richard Duffett serving as interim vice president and Scott Hill-Kennedy as the Executive Director of the FSU Foundation. I am very grateful that Rick and Scott are willing to accept these additional leadership responsibilities.
You will learn that I believe strongly in using each change in leadership at the division and college level as an opportunity to assess carefully the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of the area. During these interim periods we will bring national experts and consultants to campus to help us identify what is needed in the next leader and to provide that leader a blueprint from which to begin his or her efforts.

**Planning** - Last year a dedicated group of faculty and staff worked on a planning process for the year 2020. In this effort they developed a listing of twenty-five potential areas of focus. At this summer’s planning retreat discussions produced a rank ordering of these ideas. It is my intention to work with the University Planning Council to meld the top twelve of these ideas within the seven strategic directions of the university. The resulting materials can serve as a guide for divisions as they enter this year’s Unit Planning process.

**Administrative Software** - Another dedicated group of faculty and staff has looked at administrative software systems and produced a white paper that recommends the university move to a new system based on a relational database. This would move administrative computing from a mainframe environment and replace batch processing with real-time integrated data. From my perspective this committee has built a convincing case of the need for and the value from such a software transition. Certainly this is a very difficult project to conceive in our current environment of reduced funding. However I believe the question for Ferris State University is not *if*, but rather *when* this transition will be made. While funds are very tight, the costs for this project will only increase over time. We want to seek your input on this decision. If you have not had the opportunity to see a presentation on this software project, we will provide the opportunity to do so during the first few weeks of the fall semester.

**Coming Events** - There are a number of significant events that are a part of this fall semester. On Thursday, August 28th we will unveil the wonderful mural artist Robert Barnum has created for the FLITE Building. This is a truly remarkable, magnificent work. Thursday, October 2nd will be the presidential inauguration. I have asked the committee planning this event to create an event that will provide an opportunity for our campus to come together as a community. Finally this fall marks the initial use of the Granger Building, an amazing structure.

**Thank you** - As we begin this fall semester there are many, many people who should be thanked for their extraordinary efforts. While I cannot touch on each one, I would like to mention a few. Further I understand that in doing this I will most unlikely omit other efforts deserving recognition.

Our admissions staff has had a very effective and productive year. The results of their efforts will be a significant increase in enrollment for this fall. I have been very impressed with student orientation at Ferris. This involves people from across our university, who for seventeen days worked together to help students make the transition to this campus. During this summer we had an evening when many camp students were on campus and we were without power. A wonderful, spontaneous process evolved where our
third shift custodians helped these students, while others in our facilities and security worked to restore power. These are examples of extraordinary efforts of Ferris. Each of these succeeded because of the ability, initiative, and commitment of our people. It is easy to be very, very proud of you.

Closing Thoughts

In a presidential transition the tendency is to focus on the president. Over the past six weeks I have learned the transition really involves each of us in some way. Further I believe transitions should focus much more on you than.

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. Together I believe we can build on the present and create a truly extraordinary university of the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve
as your president