A Vision for Ferris and Its Future

I want to begin by thanking each of you for your help and support this past year. Both Patsy and I have been touched by your many acts of kindness as we joined Ferris State University and became a part of the Big Rapids community. You have helped us feel at home here and we both feel truly blessed to be a part of this extraordinary university. Thank you so very much.

It seems difficult to believe that the academic year is already drawing to a close. This has been a time when each of us worked harder to absorb funding reductions from the state. A four-year perspective helps describe these circumstances. Beginning with 2000-2001, our funding from the state has been reduced by 15% and at the same time our enrollment has grown by 15%. The cumulative effect is that today we receive 26% less support per student from the state than we did for fall 2000.

However I stand before you today more optimistic than ever for our future. We have balanced our budget for next year and, barring a change in circumstances, will not see further budget reductions during 2004-2005. Our efforts for summer are resulting in significant increases and our early numbers for fall 2004 show an overall increase in enrollment. Throughout this cycle we have done our best to manage economic hardship responsibly, and we are now turning the corner with much of this behind us.

Our message of career-based education is precisely what Michigan needs now, reflects the unique characteristics of campus, and resonates well with students and our external communities. We are being rewarded with increased enrollments and our support and concern for students is resulting in increased retention. In an environment where the state pays less than 40% of the cost of a student’s education, enrollment is and will be a very important factor in our future. While increased numbers of students do require increased efforts on our part, a decline in enrollment will bring budget reduction just as surely as reduced funding from the state. Our efforts are succeeding and as a result I am both enthusiastic and excited about our future.

This has been an extraordinary year for me as I listened and learned about Ferris State University from you, its people. To date I’ve conducted 70 small group discussions, hearing from over 1200 faculty, staff, and students. I want to thank each of you for taking time to share your thoughts, hopes, and dreams about Ferris. In each of our meetings I solicited the following information –
What three things do you cherish most about Ferris State University and would least like to lose?

What are the three biggest challenges facing Ferris State University?

If you were president what would be the three most important things for you to do?

I asked what your concerns were, the impediments that kept you from doing your best work, and your frustrations with the University. Visiting with you has provided me a truly extraordinary opportunity to understand this University and its people. There is no denying that Ferris is a unique and special place. The type of education we provide, the close interaction we promote among students and faculty, and the way we care about students, are incredible institutional qualities. Moreover our degree mix is unlike that of any other university.

Throughout this year I have tried to look into the heart and soul of our University seeking to understand who we are, the challenges we face, and what we can become. At the same time I have looked deep within myself seeking to combine what I have learned from you with my experiences, values, and convictions for the future of higher education. What I share with you today is and will remain a draft. It will continue to evolve with your input, suggestions, and reactions and as the environment in which we live changes. Thank you for being with me today as I speak from my heart about Ferris and its future.

We Need to Create a Learning University

My vision is that we will come to think of Ferris as a learning university. Allow me to explain. For years education has focused upon teaching. While it is important for each of us involved with education to become better teachers, I believe it is essential we focus on learning, not teaching. Consider it this way, if I become a world-class teacher and my students do not learn, what is the value of this experience?

The measure of our success is more than what we do; it is the sum total and outcomes of these efforts. In looking at our university I suggest we consider three concepts for our academic experience –

- A Focus on Careers
- Learning that is “State of the Art,” and
- A Commitment to Learning.
A Focus on Careers

Among American universities there are few like Ferris. More than any university I know, we focus upon preparing students for careers. This unique career focus should become a core value and provide a nexus for our efforts. As I see it, this experience includes at least four key components.

✓ The first is a strong grounding in academics, creating graduates who think clearly and critically, communicate and write effectively, understand both quantitative and qualitative analysis, and who appreciate social, historical, scientific, and artistic contexts. The importance of this should never be discounted as we are doing far more than preparing our students for a job; we are educating students for life.

✓ The second is preparation in a program area, incorporating an understanding of the skills and knowledge necessary for success in a career field. This is both theoretical and practical preparation that helps us graduate students prepared to succeed. Beyond this it creates for students a knowledge core and an ambition for lifelong learning upon which they can build as their chosen fields change and evolve. As part of this process our students must learn how to learn.

✓ Third, there is a practical application, internship, or co-op experience, where the student applies not just the lessons from the second component, but also the first. For me a critical strength of the Ferris experience is not just learning, but learning from doing. For many students these will be off-campus experiences, but for some areas these experiences can be simulated on one of our campuses.

✓ Finally, throughout there is a continual need to help students understand the career possibilities we offer and to provide continual support through advisement so that we do more than help students plan a course schedule, we provide insight into the career they have chosen. Beyond this we help them transition to a promising position upon graduation, and continue to provide support during their initial formative years after leaving our campuses. Through these combined efforts, we help guide student development toward success.

In your thoughts about our future I have heard frequent concerns about whether we are a technical institution or are becoming a liberal arts institution. For me it is far too limiting for our future to suggest that our university will be one or the other. I believe strongly that it is within the combination of these two that...
lies our greatest strength. Recent degree developments in technical and traditional areas have made us a stronger institution. We have significant strengths in both, giving us an advantage over other universities. As we add curricula, we must do so in a way that our overall program mix is affordable and sustainable. It is also an approach that challenges each of us as members of this community to work together rather than separately.

It is important that I be both clear and explicit here. Ferris will always have a strong core of technical and professional programs. The concept of careers embraces this strongly and these programs will continue to grow. However, traditional areas of program emphasis cannot be sustained or maintained if student interest and market demand do not exist, if we can no longer provide a program that meets our expectations on quality, or if the cost of doing so is beyond our financial capabilities. Simply put, it is wrong for us to prepare students for a career that no longer exists. And it is just as wrong to prepare students poorly or inadequately for a career.

With this careers focus we will continue to create and develop degrees in new areas of emphasis. Creative and innovative approaches to education are very much a part of the past, present and future for Ferris. Here again we must address questions of student interest, market demand, cost, and through careful analysis determine whether we can provide a new degree program well. The simple fact that we can develop a degree does not mean that we should, and there is no logic that will convince me we should offer a new program simply because we currently do not. Instead proposed degrees must include careful analysis of why the degree is needed and how our efforts can be a unique addition to the field, rather than a duplication of established programs available at other institutions.

These questions of interest, demand, quality, and cost are central to how we use our resources at Ferris. From my perspective the single most important allocator of resources in our budget is the course schedule. Allow me to explain. Nearly 75% of our budget is in people; the largest component of this is faculty. We determine what faculty will teach through a process that begins with the programs we offer, the curriculum of those programs, and then how often the courses are scheduled. While faculty do many important things, it is the decision of what courses we teach that will determine where much of their efforts will be directed. As an example, do you know how many courses were offered last fall semester? Five hundred, a thousand? In reality the number of course sections offered fall semester was 3,163.

We must ask ourselves if our course schedule represents an effective and efficient use of our faculty. I believe there are portions of the course schedule that
directly reflect programmatic, departmental and college silos. In our university there are colleges who lack a core curriculum, when the potential for one exists, creating an environment of duplication from one department to the next. Likewise there are majors where every course is taught within one department. Finally there are remarkably similar courses taught in multiple departments. As a faculty member who has been involved with the creation of many curricula I understand the value specialized coursework can provide. However in the context of constrained resources this may be something we can neither sustain nor support. Further we must understand that when we choose to do so, it limits our ability to pursue other opportunities.

It is easy to see how this has developed. Rewards and incentives for academic areas have been based upon the number of students attracted and the credit hours produced. It is common sense that when more is taught within any department this potentially increases support for that area. In our current funding environment, the time for this approach has passed. There are very few groups that I have met with who have not told me how hard they are working and how desperately they need additional personnel lines. However, it is the reality we face that significant additional resources are not likely from the state and a continued pattern of significant tuition increases will price the cost of our education beyond the reach of those who may need it most.

Ultimately I believe future success will depend in part upon our ability to find common solutions to curriculum and to eliminate duplication in our course offerings. There are very few fields today that do not stress the importance of teamwork and collaboration. We both believe and teach this, but beyond that must model it in our curriculum. As a university we must and we will develop processes that foster and reward collaboration among faculty, and that create strong incentives for departments and colleges to do so. As part of this effort I will challenge academic affairs to develop a process and mechanisms that review programs effectively, directing resources to areas of growth and promise.

If we are to effectively provide career-based education, we must also work to become more engaged in the world in which we live. In this effort we will develop better partnerships with business, industry, state government, and other educational institutions. If we are to find additional sources of revenue, the strongest possibility is that these will come from the external sector. As we build new productive partnerships, we must remember that partnership implies a benefit for not one, but both parties. We need to expand the entrepreneurial nature of our institution; discovering new ways that we can help build the economy of Michigan. Finally we must become much better partners with K-12 education,
applied technology centers, and community colleges, looking carefully at the ways we work together for student learning.

In these times of rapid change University programs and curricula cannot be static. Ferris has been especially successful when we have been able to anticipate and fill the need for new degrees and programs. We must develop a process that scans the horizon, identifies new educational opportunities, and creates the programming to meet these needs.

While not suggesting what these new fields may be, I will offer two examples of possible opportunities of how this may work. Consider the developing fields of fuel cells or nanotechnology. At Ferris we may not create the technology, but will instead create programming that prepares people to either manufacture these devices or service them. Likewise think about a field like homeland security. Here successful efforts will need to combine disciplines in science, technology, and criminal justice in new and different ways. Far beyond these examples, we will have numerous opportunities to develop educational expertise in many fields. In doing so it is useful to remember that these may be found anywhere across the educational spectrum and may indeed be at the certificate or associate degree level.

Programs That Are “State of the Art”

For our graduates to have the greatest opportunities for success, our education must be “State of the Art.” This means our curricula must be up-to-date and relevant. It will necessitate we sort through the increasing glut of information to select and synthesize that which is most important and relevant. It will require we support our programs with current equipment and techniques. We will need to update our classroom and laboratory facilities so they promote relevant learning activities.

This also means that we must embrace and significantly improve our use of technology. At Ferris we have always subscribed to an educational approach that creates an environment that is “high touch,” promoting student interaction with faculty and staff. It is time to combine that “high touch” approach with one that is also “high tech.” It is unlikely a degree can be “State of the Art” without this. In doing so we must remember that technology is not an end, but a means.

Like most universities computer technology at Ferris has never received the funding needed for equipment, education, and support. Regrettably we have not been able to provide faculty and staff the assistance needed to implement technology effectively. This is not a criticism of those involved in information technology support, but rather an acknowledgement that no effort can see its
workload increase tenfold, experience a reduction in resource support, and hope to meet user needs.

The same is also true for our computer network, which sees continually increasing demands for bandwidth. At the same time it experiences attacks that grow increasingly more sophisticated and destructive. It is easy to see already how dependent we have become upon technology for the day-to-day efforts of our offices. When the network is down, much of the work of the university cannot continue.

Within the idea of “State of the Art” I see technology as a unifying concept, cutting across departments, colleges, and the university to create opportunities for collaboration. With the integration of email, Internet resources, word processing, spreadsheets and presentation graphics, technology impacts most if not all offerings at our university. I envision a future where we provide one-stop technology support for our users, both virtually and physically. This environment will help provide our people the type of world-class support needed to offer an education that is “State of the Art.” In this we will become a campus that is truly “high tech and high touch.”

I see this environment as one which jumpstarts our efforts to provide learning for students that is independent of both time and place. Consider this conundrum. In the evenings we have faculty who drive to off-campus locations to teach courses there. At the same time we have students who drive from Big Rapids to take these very same courses at off-campus locations, because they are not offered here. There must be a better way to provide this education and we will develop it.

I am convinced that our faculty can implement the Internet into their teaching in extraordinary ways. Given the unique palette of degrees we offer at Ferris, there is significant need for these both throughout Michigan and beyond. Currently we have some faculty who are succeeding extraordinarily well in facilitating learning through the Internet. However, I believe we have the obligation to provide “world-class” support for these efforts. As a “state-of-the-art” institution, we will create an online university that provides a full level of student support. This will have the proper incentives for course development, delivery, and revision and utilize technical tools that empower rather than restrict effective learning. It will provide the type of world-class support our faculty deserve, and be funded in a way that sustains and enables the rapid growth I believe will accompany this effort.
Commitment to Learning

Much of what we do as a university is very much determined by our own experiences. Many of our approaches to education, including curricula, courses, classroom presentations, and at times even mannerisms, have been adapted from those who taught and influenced us. As such some may represent best practice examples culled from a lifetime of experience. In other cases these approaches may tend to propagate techniques of the past. I want to challenge you to determine the effectiveness of the educational experience we provide. Is what we offer based on “what we have always done,” or does it reflect the best of learning theory and practice? To be specific, I would encourage you to consider the following -

✓ Have we carefully and thoughtfully considered what our students should know and understand?
✓ Do we know where these concepts are presented, explained, and integrated into our courses and curricula?
✓ How do we know if our students have learned and can apply these concepts?
✓ What opportunities do we provide our students to integrate this learning outside of the classroom, so they graduate both understanding what will greet them in their field and be prepared for accomplishment in it?
✓ How do we create in our students a love of lifelong learning so they will have both the tools and the motivation to continue their own learning far beyond the education we provide?
✓ Based on analysis of the above and with external input, how do we continually revise and update what we present so that we are indeed committed to learning that is “State of the Art?”

We Must Work Together

It is unequivocally clear what is the highest priority for Ferris State University as we seek to become a learning university. We must create an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, becoming a university community that truly works together. This is an environment where faculty and administration, staff and administration, faculty and staff, and finally all three groups must work together. Much has been accomplished at Ferris, but at times this has been done in an adversarial atmosphere. Sid Systma, a faculty member in business, described this for me in a way I find visually compelling. As a university we tend to circle the wagons and then shoot inward. Like most universities we find ourselves frequently divided, compartmentalized, and placed in silos. Our interactions, associations, and experiences frequently are limited to the work we do or the department in
which we reside. In envisioning our university we must find ways to bring ourselves together, rather than divide ourselves up.

As I visited with you I heard over and over your commitment to our university and students. I remember well a late evening conversation with third shift custodians. When asked about concerns they had regarding the institution, one replied that his frustration was that he needed more Lime-Brite. Candidly I had no idea what this was, but learned that it is floor cleaner. This person’s concern was not for himself, but that he be given the tools to do his job better. This single instance typified what I frequently heard. People are deeply committed to Ferris, want the support to do their job more effectively and professionally, and through these efforts will commit to building a great and strong university. To do so we will need to build new relationships where each of us must work together – faculty, staff, and administration, – to help our students succeed.

This is an atmosphere where we must both listen and communicate. It is my expectation this will be a climate where we look to build empowered leadership at all levels of the University. I have worked to encourage vice presidents and vice chancellors to make more decisions and to have more control over their divisions. As this behavior - listening, communicating and enabling - is modeled throughout the university, we will empower deans, managers, division heads, department chairs, supervisors, and ultimately all our people throughout our campuses. This new accountability and responsibility will require more than the simple transfer of authority. Success in this approach will require support and increased leadership development opportunities.

As part of this effort I envision consultative processes that work. This means the continued development of our relationship with the faculty senate and other representative groups. In the academic arena I am disappointed with a governance approach that sees proposals developed by senate committees, approved by the senate, and then administratively sent to additional committees for study. This takes too much time and effort, and is far too slow in a rapidly changing educational environment. My hope is that by working collaboratively the efforts of the senate can be implemented without the additional step of administrative committees. Working together we will eliminate these parallel, and at times paralyzing, silos of governance at our University.

Beyond working together, we must work smarter and more effectively. Although I have spent my entire life in higher education I am still astonished by our penchant to create committees. Over the past few weeks I have assembled a list of committees on campus. While admittedly incomplete, it numbers more than 325 committees and the list is still growing. That is one committee for every four
or five people who work here. It is impossible for me to see how this is an effective use of your time and our resources. I want to challenge our campus to look carefully at the accomplishments of these committees and to eliminate those which are either ineffective or unproductive. While we will create groups to work together on challenges and initiatives, it is my hope they will tackle a task and dissolve once this has been addressed. Our collaborative efforts must be as fluid as the ever changing environment in which we live.

In a similar vein it is difficult for me to see the value of some processes we routinely conduct as a university. While well intentioned, they seem to waste both time and resources. We need to ask ourselves why we require actions, collect unused data, or create forms that consume the time of others. What purpose do these serve and what is the collective good we receive from them? It steals our time, saps our strength, and wastes our resources, when we have precious little of these commodities to spare.

**We Must Become an Engaged Campus**

As a learning university with a residential life component we have an extraordinary opportunity to influence our students both inside and outside the campus. It is my sincerest hope that we can truly become an engaged campus. In my nine months here I have observed and attended many remarkable campus events. However, these activities mirror some of the same silo-like characteristics found in our curriculum and on our campus. At times it is difficult for me to understand the connection and coordination among the many events on our campus. No matter who the sponsor may be, there does not appear to be a coherent approach to the scheduling or promotion of these activities. As a result, there are evenings with multiple, competing events. Among these have been some of the most wonderful opportunities I have ever experienced. Regrettably these events are often very poorly attended by students, faculty, staff, and our community.

It is my hope we can develop an approach to campus activities that will maximize the use of these resources and create a truly engaged, educated community. In this I believe our educational efforts should become more than just courses and activities. We must become a true university, helping to open, shape, and mold the minds of our students, not just within the walls of our classrooms but throughout the entire college experience.

This combined and coordinated approach to education will also allow us to promote two ideas which I believe should be core values in the education we provide, citizenship and diversity. The first suggests that expectations for us should
extend beyond the individual good of our students and focus on the collective good of our campus, community, state and nation. We must do much more than educate our students for a career. In addition we develop and foster habits of community involvement, volunteerism, and service. We should expand on these efforts helping students establish the pattern for a meaningful life. Indeed, if we do not accept this responsibility to prepare students to be the leaders of our democracy who will?

We must challenge ourselves to expand on the concept we call diversity. It is a fact that we are preparing students for a world that is far different from the one in which we have lived. Our society is one that is global, connected and diverse and our efforts must help foster understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of differences in ethnicity, culture, religion, preference, and abilities. We must look within and honestly assess how we are fulfilling our role as an academy that both values and embraces diversity as it relates to students, faculty, staff, curriculum, and values. As part of this commitment we need to reexamine our approaches to the recruitment and retention of faculty, staff, and students, and determine how we can create a truly diverse campus. In short we must become the model we hope our students will become.

As we have visited together I have searched for the glue that holds us together, those opportunities when we celebrate our institution. In our sessions I observed how much you enjoy talking with each other. It is interesting to watch the interaction of faculty and staff from different departments and locations on campus. It does not matter whether you have worked here for fifteen years or are in your first or second year. Very quickly camaraderie and sharing develops. We must seek out and foster ways to create these opportunities where we come together outside those narrow confines where we work each day. Campus activities can and do provide such opportunities.

In our discussions I have heard frequent mention of a past practice of using the Centennial Dining Room for impromptu luncheon gatherings. I have asked Drs. Burcham and Duffett to work on a plan for reopening the Centennial Dining Room and am pleased to announce that we will do so with the beginning of Fall Semester 2004. I invite you and your colleagues to join us as we seek to create this more engaged campus community.

As we work to become an engaged campus, it is my dream that this will become much more than a job or position. Instead it will become a true calling, a career that has profound purpose with the opportunity to make a meaningful difference. To do so will require that we work hard at breaking down the barriers that separate us and find ways that we can and will work together. We must find
ways to empower and engage, rather than divide and separate. In this way the collective result can become more than the sum of our individual efforts.

**An Enabling Process for our Future**

This vision for the future is something we must create together. As a campus community we will be empowered by that which we work to create. My plan for transforming this vision into reality will provide the opportunity for each member of the campus to be involved. To provide an immediate opportunity for feedback and discussion I have scheduled two meetings next week, Monday, April 19th at 3:00 pm and Tuesday, April 20th at 2:00 pm. In that setting I’ll look forward to answering your questions and hearing your reactions to these ideas.

Beyond these sessions will be two large group activities; the first on June 14th, the opening day of Summer University, and the second on August 23rd, the Opening of School Convocation. On these occasions I will present a revised version of these remarks with an opportunity for all to respond in small group sessions and to suggest ways in which they can contribute to building this future.

Helping to guide this process will be a wonderful colleague and facilitator, Dr. Kim Cameron, who holds faculty appointments in both the Business and Education Colleges at the University of Michigan. A former Dean of the Weatherhead School of Business at Case Western Reserve University, Kim is an expert in the developing field of Positive Organizational Scholarship. As such he seeks out and researches the characteristics that make organizations extraordinary, places where commitment goes far beyond a place to work. This is precisely what we want to create here.

The results of our discussions over the next few months will serve as the basis for next year’s Unit Action Plans. As we move forward I will challenge each manager, supervisor, department chair, head, dean, vice president, and vice chancellor to help us create a true learning university through processes where we work together to truly engage our campus. As part of these annual planning efforts I will ask that we assess and measure our progress in reflecting a “Focus on Careers,” creating “Learning that is ‘State of the Art,’” and demonstrating a true “Commitment to Learning.” We must do more than discuss these ideas, we must hold ourselves accountable to use them to create meaningful change and then measure our success in doing so.

My experience is that three-year planning cycles work well for universities, balancing the need to look forward with the changing environment in which we live. What we develop from these discussions will serve as the focus for efforts
through 2006-2007. On a three-year cycle we will go through this process again beginning in the fall of 2006. This will serve as the basis for our planning efforts in 2007, 2008, and 2009 and also be the foundation for what I hope will be our first major capital campaign. Capital campaigns commonly begin with two years in the silent phase, in this case 2007 and 2008, when major gifts are secured to assure the success of the campaign. The announcement of the public phase would then be in 2009. This will be a very special year for us as we celebrate the 125th anniversary of the founding of Ferris in 1884.

Concluding Thoughts

I appreciate very much the opportunity to visit with you and to provide my thoughts on a vision for our future. I believe strongly that we can and will achieve this vision. We will “Create a Learning University” and through this develop approaches where “We Work Together” and “Become an Engaged Campus.”

I have placed forward an approach on how we begin. As we progress down this path, ultimately how each unit embeds this vision into their programs and practices must be distinctly your responsibility. I look forward to our efforts together as we work to create a new Ferris State University that is even more effective, exciting and innovative than it is today. Please join with me to help create a truly great and distinctive University.

Thank you so much for the honor of serving you as president of Ferris State University.