Thank you for inviting me to visit with you today. It is a pleasure to share some of Ferris State University’s efforts in helping students from our state’s foster care system to attend college. In doing so, I want to stress that this is the work of many dedicated people - faculty, staff and members of our community. It is their efforts that are making a difference and it is they who deserve credit for what is being accomplished.

At Ferris State University one of our core values is opportunity, and this commitment dates back to our earliest days. When Woodbridge Ferris founded our institution in 1884, he did so to provide the opportunity of education to those who were being passed over by the educational efforts at that time. Access to education is an issue that is just as important here today. At a State Court Administrative Office conference presented by the Michigan Department of Human Services last April, a review of “Educational Needs of Youth in Foster Care” included a study that found fewer than two percent of students who were alumni of foster care completed a bachelor’s degree, but that 21 percent completed some kind of degree or certificate beyond high school. Clearly, there is work for us all to do here in creating opportunity and success for these students.

Ferris began its Youth Incentive Initiative in 2009, inspired in part by Big Rapids resident Sally Workman. Sally visited with me and expressed her desire to help foster youth attend college. She asked how we could work together to make this happen. Sally spent the majority of her formative years in foster homes, and met her mentor in the workplace when she was 17-years-old. Seeing other teens in similar situations, she hoped she would be able to extend mentoring opportunities to these children facing the same struggles she overcame.

As Sally herself put it, “I had a mentor who changed the direction of my life; I couldn’t have had any of the opportunities that followed without her in my life. How many children need that exact same thing? How many children of all ages and of all circumstances, not just those whose are similar to what mine were, could be helped?”

In order to build awareness and interest in this initiative, we put together a campus forum on this topic highlighted by keynote speaker Justice Marilyn Kelly. Our next task was finding the right leader to pull together the various stakeholders who could help make this concept a reality. For us that person was our Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, David Pilgrim. Dr. Pilgrim is himself an orphan and has great passion for designing a program responsive to the kinds of needs he himself understands in a most personal way. Our Dean of Students, Leroy Wright, and his assistant, Nick Campau, serve as program directors.
At Ferris, we have sought to learn from, and build upon, the experience of other institutions working with foster youth in designing our own program. We scheduled a “Day of Dialogue” on our campus and invited representatives from other colleges and universities who had already started similar programs to share their experiences and successful strategies.

At Ferris, our Youth Incentive Program focuses on increasing higher education opportunities for young people who have aged out of foster care, or who are orphaned and low-income, which we define as being Pell Grant eligible. The initiative provides for individual $4,000 university-funded scholarships to help supplement other educational support.

We also drew upon the expertise of Jennifer Wallace, “The TIP Lady,” who has done much to help Ferris increase the number of students who take advantage of Michigan’s Tuition Incentive Program. I know of no one other than Jennifer who has done more to encourage students who might not do so to attend college. At Ferris we were proud to recognize her with an honorary degree as our thanks for the many, many lives she has touched, guided and shaped. Jennifer, I believe, is also on the planning committee for this event. Thank you for the work you do and the difference you make in students’ lives.

The TIP program pays for the first two years of college tuition for Medicaid-eligible students if they are enrolled in career-oriented associate degree programs. We award more career-oriented associate degrees than any other public university and are the largest recipient of TIP funds among Michigan’s four-year colleges. Our university has a long tradition of structuring programs that allow students to earn an associate degree, then “ladder” that two-year degree into a four-year course of study. It is not an infrequent occurrence for me to speak with students in our TIP program who began their college career thinking they would only complete a two-year degree. More often than not, they go on to earn a bachelor’s degree and even do graduate work. Providing a clear and achievable path toward a degree helps students experience success in higher education. With the confidence built from that success they tackle additional challenges and reach goals they might not otherwise have thought possible.

I believe combining our Youth Incentive scholarship with the TIP program provides sustainable financial support for the FYI students. Coupled with a mentorship program, we truly can help these students overcome the odds they face and earn a degree that will serve as the basis for their future success. A good example of this is Jessica, who just completed her sophomore year in our Social Work/Journalism programs. Jessica’s struggles began at an early age; she was the daughter of parents troubled by substance abuse. The State of Michigan took custody of her and her brothers because her aunts and uncles were unable to care for them. She moved several times and attended three different high schools before she found a place to call home with her foster parents, who she calls her “true parents.” It was through depression and anxiety that she started to accept what people had been telling her all of her life, “you are stupid, you can’t get good grades, and you will never be anything.” It was her foster parents who helped pull her through her initial depression and let her know that there were people who cared and who wanted her to succeed.
The Department of Human Services and Ferris helped her develop an award package that included Ferris assistance funding, work study, TIP and the Education and Training Voucher (ETV). Today, her cumulative GPA is a 3.45, and is perhaps too modest about the courage it took for her to succeed when she says, “you just have to be comfortable in your new shoes.” Her aspiration is to pursue a Masters of Social Work degree and to contribute to the improvement and safety of youth in foster care. As an independent student, her advice to other foster care or disadvantaged orphaned youth is as follows:

- Learn to love yourself
- Never give up or let your past negatively impact your future
- Work hard and be determined
- Make a connection with the local Department of Human Services
- Seek out guidance and support, and don’t be shy about it
- Develop a connection to and with faculty and staff
- Be open to making new friends
- Focus on your grades and don’t get caught up with the wrong crowd.

For students like Jessica, getting off to a good start is critical and acclimation is very important. At Ferris each new freshman student enrolls in the Ferris State University Seminar, a class designed to provide first-year students with personal connections, knowledge and resources that enhances their potential for learning, safety, satisfaction and graduation. The course is designed to facilitate student transition from high school to university life, and by so doing improve student academic performance and retention. This fall we will offer a section primarily, but not exclusively, for Ferris Youth Initiative Students.

At Ferris, we have changed systems and processes to accommodate FYI students. Because Ferris is their home, residence halls need to be open year-round. Over the past several years we have approached the renovation of various public spaces on campus with an eye toward making these spaces conducive to collaboration between students, and between students and faculty. While this is beneficial to all students, I believe that the environment this helps create – one in which there is less of a strict line drawn between living, classroom and study space – is especially helpful to students for whom campus truly is home. By facilitating positive and creative interaction between students, we are trying to create a campus that minimizes the isolation that some students unused to an academic setting can fall into.

We believe the key to our approach is the emphasis on providing a mentor for each student. It was our observation that the greater challenge with FYI students was retaining them at the University and then moving them along a successful path to graduation. Great care is taken in choosing mentors and this responsibility carries with it the commitment of considerable time in working with the student. And while academics are important, this mentoring goes far beyond academics to involve life-skills, strategies for coping with stressful situations, and help with any number of obstacles or setbacks the student might encounter.
We see the mentor as an advocate, supporter, guide and connection to the campus and community for the student. As we gain greater experience we are also seeing and understanding better the critical role a coach can play. Ferris recently applied for and received a three-year state grant to employ a coach for these students. We see this as providing an expanded hands-on approach with our students, helping them to solve potential academic problems when they develop. With this additional support each FYI student will have a support team of an academic advisor, mentor and coach.

While we plan to expand our Youth Incentive Initiative, our goal is not to enroll students into the program, but rather to graduate them from it. I believe Ferris State University's small classes, individual attention and career-oriented focus are an especially good fit for students who may not have had the same level of preparation for success, or who lack the support structure that many other students enjoy.

It is important to stress the importance of gatherings such as this to share information about this issue. Last year Ferris State University hosted the 2011 Michigan Teen Conference and we will sponsor this conference again next month, on June 19th and 20th. It is a two-day conference designed for youth who are preparing to exit foster care, their caregivers and professionals who work with young people. The conference theme is “Take Charge of Your Journey.” There is an extraordinary breadth of topics covered during the conference, including workshops on “Eating: It’s More Than Opening a Can,” “Teens and the Law,” “Dollar Sense: 10 Steps to a Good Money Life,” and “Spirituality and You.”

This huge range of issues drives home two truths for me. First, the audience we are serving has many needs. Second, and most importantly, the people we serve are, like the rest of us, complex individuals trying to realize their dreams. While it is necessary to understand the needs they have arising from their particular life journeys, they should not be defined or limited by their situations.

Our founder Woodbridge Ferris said, “My plea in Michigan—and it will be my plea to the last breath I draw, and the last word I speak—is education for all children, all men, and all women of Michigan, all the people in all our states all the time.” Extending educational opportunity is at the core of our mission and is something about which we care deeply. The alternatives are not outcomes we should be willing to accept.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these efforts with you. I would invite you advice, counsel, assistance and support. Working together we can and will create a bright, promising future for foster youth students.