

Comments to the Board of Trustees

I have great admiration for Woodbridge Ferris, not only for his words but also for his actions. From 1910 to the mid-1920s, when racial segregation was legally enforced across much of the country, he welcomed African American students to Ferris Institute, providing them access to college preparatory and college courses. He mentored several of the students, including Russell Dixon, who became the first African American to earn an advanced degree in dentistry from Northwestern University and later served as the Dean of the Howard University College of Dentistry. When these young Black students encountered housing discrimination in Big Rapids, Woodbridge Ferris used his own money to purchase a house for them to live in. Approximately 70 African American students attended Ferris Institute during that period, and to ensure their well-being, Woodbridge Ferris entrusted Garrett Masselink with the responsibility of supporting and looking after them.

Woodbridge Ferris was deeply committed to these students, striving to create a campus where they felt a true sense of belonging and had the opportunity to succeed. We uphold his legacy when we come together to ensure that every student feels a sense of belonging at the University. Unfortunately, a century after his passing, we find ourselves in another era where some students—international students, LGBTQ+ students, and racial minorities—do not always feel comfortable at the University or in the surrounding communities.

Woodbridge Ferris was a leader worth emulating. We should be proud that the institute bearing his name welcomed women in its earliest classes, enrolled international students before 1900, and admitted Black students in the first decade of the 20th century. He also invited speakers to educate students about disabilities, reinforcing his commitment to inclusion. Making the world better was central to his legacy. We must never forget that we did not create this university—we inherited it and a powerful tradition of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice.

When Woodbridge Ferris declared that the institution he founded was “... for all the people in all our states all the time,” I believe he meant *all* people—people like us and people not like us, those with wealth, those in the middle class, and those facing financial hardship, people of all religious faiths and those with none; individuals of every racial and ethnic background; those who are straight,

gay, non-binary, or transgender; conservatives, moderates, and liberals; and learners of all styles and abilities. An inclusive Ferris is a campus where everyone feels a deep sense of belonging—that the University is just as much theirs as anyone else's. This is the Ferris we are striving to create.

We have persistent challenges—most notably, hiring and retaining a diverse faculty and staff and decreasing student achievement gaps—and we are addressing those areas. But we also have a new challenge: the dismantling of diversity, equity, inclusion, and civil rights in this country. This seems to result from a misinterpretation or mischaracterization of these concepts. As I mentioned earlier, we were doing this work a century ago.

I can't speak for other colleges, but we are committed to fostering an inclusive learning environment at Ferris. The Diversity, Inclusion, and Strategic Initiatives Division at Ferris is a resource for all students and employees at the University. Not surprisingly, the DISI staff is diverse—there is gender, racial, religious, economic, and political diversity among our staff.

The work of the University should benefit all students. The Navigate retention software is designed to support every student, not just racial minorities, though it remains a vital tool in our equity efforts. A diverse campus embraces individuals with different backgrounds, perspectives, and interests. With over 220 Registered Student Organizations—including the Fellowship of Christian Optometrists, First Generation College Students, Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, College Republicans and Democrats, and Bulldog Billionaires—there is a place for every student to connect and belong.

And speaking of everyone being invited, on February 23, Ferris State University will host the 35th Annual International Festival of Cultures. This beautiful event is open to everyone. We invite you, your friends, and your family members to join us in the ballrooms of this building for this intercultural event.

I have said before and will say again—out of the more than four thousand colleges and universities in this country, there is nowhere I would have rather spent my career. I take great pride in the fact that diversity is one of our institution's six core values and that belonging is one of the four pillars of our strategic plan. I am proud, and I believe Woodbridge Ferris would be as well. A big thank you to all for working daily to build and sustain a welcoming university.