The ideas of opportunity and building success for our graduates has been a part of our DNA since Woodbridge Ferris founded our institution in 1884.

Our approach to learning, where theory meets practice, learning by doing, has been and is at the core of what we do. And there has never been a more important time for our students, our region, and our state than today. Between now and 2018, 84% of all the new jobs created in Michigan will require a college education.

But then this is something each of you know, that’s why you’re here this evening. Many of you have benefitted from a Ferris education. I’d like all the alumni here this evening to stand and be recognized. Thank you. A big part of what we do at Ferris is to help dreams become reality each and every day – in Big Rapids, in 17 locations across the state, and right here in Grand Rapids.

Beginning nearly 15 years ago there was a dream of joining Kendall College of Art and Design with Ferris State University. Ten years ago this merger became a reality and from it has been forged one of the great partnership success stories in American higher education.

At that time Kendall had an enrollment of slightly more than 500 students and a budget of $4 million. Today they are a vibrant college of over 1400 students with a budget of $15 million. One of the architects of this dream has been their President Oliver Evans. Oliver will retire this spring and I’d ask he stand and be recognized.

Begin slides

One of our dreams here has been the historic Federal Building right next to the Kendall facilities. Combined with student housing for Kendall this dream has offered three contiguous blocks of living and learning themed around the arts in downtown Grand Rapids.

Slide One – old postcard – An original post card for the historic federal building, constructed in 1909-11

Slide Two – 1950 post office\court house – These are the entrances on the Ionia Street side

Slide Three – magnificent building – This is the first floor hallway, which once served as the lobby. On my first trip, there were blue tarps and water flowing through the roof to barrels on the 4th floor. What was once presented as a $10 million project became nearly triple that – with every mechanical system needing replacement. We had to think in new ways to make this possible, building a public-private partnership with Christman, the city, county, and our state. Beyond this we needed to make new friends who could help us.
Slide Four – friends – One of the first of these friends was Peter Wege, the Wege Foundation and then executive director, Ellen Satterlee. When we needed someone to believe in us, she did. Ellen’s in the yellow. She’s also with us tonight. Ellen, would you please stand. This photo gives you a peek inside on how we are making a dream become a reality.

Slide Five – eaten away corner in the building – Because of the extensive water damage there were large sections where the walls had been eaten away.

Slide Six – basement demolition – And so the demolition began; this is the basement where much of the concrete floor, some of it 16 inches thick, was removed. In all, over a million pounds of concrete were taken from the building.

Slide Seven – demolition – This is first floor demolition facing toward Division, the backroom of the post office. The metal structure was a hidden area used to observe the postal employees as they worked.

Slide Eight – demolition – The third and fourth floors were a series of offices, transforming them into offices creates this kind of rubble.

Slide Nine – café – Despite its condition this was a building with great bones. This is the southwestern corner of the postal area much as a worker might have seen it in the early 1900’s. Here it has been uncovered to create the new café in this building.

Slide Ten – woodwork – Some of the bones of this building had to be uncovered.

Slide Eleven – window – When one begins uncovering, underneath the layers of white paint and the grime is woodwork of solid oak.

Slide Twelve – skylights – The 3rd and 4th floors had not been used since the mid-70’s, over 40 years. They were simply put, pretty grim. Look what happens when the 4th floor skylights are unveiled. This area will house the Wege Center for Sustainable Design.

Slide Thirteen – roof – Of course we needed a new roof.

Slide Fourteen – exterior – And the exterior was completely repaired and cleaned.

Slide Fifteen – exterior – This is a dream that’s still unfinished and something we work on every day. This is the Division Street side. When the building was constructed Ionia Street was the front, Division the back. Today Division is a busier street and it is the least attractive part of the facility. Given the constraints of a historic renovation, how does one change this and at the same time capture the dynamic of Kendall and its commitment to cutting edge design?
Slide Sixteen – concept drawing – Alumnus Val Schmeider created this concept for a sculpture park for the Division Street side. Enhancing the green space, providing places for people to sit and visit and providing placement for sculptures that can be displayed right on the streets of Grand Rapids. It’s a stunning idea and one we’re working to achieve.

Slide Seventeen – sign – One last story: As on much of the upper floors, in a room on the 4th floor, there were places where the walls were completely eaten away. A little over a year ago I was conducting a tour during ArtPrize and discovered that someone, perhaps one of the workmen, had placed a small sign in the space – “Planting the Seeds of a Dream...”

Conclusion

For this historic Federal Building our dreams are not yet realized, challenges remain, there is construction to do, and every day we are seeking the remaining financial support from our community of friends and donors.

It is your generosity that is helping this dream become a reality.