

# Dr. David Eisler Podcast

📅 Thu, 4/7 11:52AM 🕒 24:10

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

ferris, students, degrees, pep band, michigan, building, people, grand rapids, helping, kendall, ferris state university, college, state, associate degrees, gave, university, ed, programs, higher ed, president

## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, David Eisler

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### Announcer 00:01

Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.

### Ed Clemente 00:28

Hello, I'm Ed Clemente, your host today for the show, and this is a personal best for me to have Doctor and President David Eisler of Ferris State University. Welcome to the show, I'm gonna call you Dave, you gave me permission...

### David Eisler 00:43

Yes, Ed. It's great to be with you. We have lots of history together and we both love Ferris, so this should be a lot of fun. That's correct.

### Ed Clemente 00:49

Yeah and you know, you're a bit of a legend, actually, because I know you and I talked about this a little bit on the pre-call, but you've been there 19 years, am I correct? And you've got to be one of the longer serving presidents I would guess in the state even in some degree. I know, you probably don't keep a record of it, but I know, you have seen a lot of other people come and goes and go since you've had your tenure.

D

David Eisler 01:10

Certainly among the public university presidents I am the senior President, some days it doesn't take long to get there, but we've had a great career here at Ferris State University.

E

Ed Clemente 01:20

Yeah, and I know you've done a really great job with that university, especially, you know, since I've been there, and how much you've grown and expanded and programs and everything, but this is sort of like a question that most people probably wouldn't ask you directly, but what is the President kind of do at a university?

D

David Eisler 01:39

That's a great question Ed, and I think that one of the things you learn when you're a president, you have lots of people that you work with, lots of constituents that you have to work with, but I think that the pieces about a president is, you certainly need to look after the fiscal health of university. You need to look at the strategic future of the university. I think you have to create a community that works for faculty, staff, and especially for students because students are why we exist as a university, and part of the financial pieces; you need to be adept at raising money for the institution because there's never enough from the state and we want to keep tuition low.

E

Ed Clemente 02:17

Yes. And you know, and Ferris has always been sort of that affordable university, at least it was in my day, and I think you still hold to that tenure, and you try to help out a lot of underserved students, too, right?

D


David Eisler 02:27

We do. We have 1600 students who come to us who are part of the tuition incentive program from the state, TIP. Those are students from from Medicaid families, a little less than 40% of our students qualify for Pell Grants, but I think the characteristic of a Ferris student is that they're working to go to school. And I think more than 80% of our students work, and many of them work two jobs because they're paying their own way through school.

E

Ed Clemente 02:52

And, and I mean, this is sort of a, I thought it was interesting, but you gave me a better relay of it of not only how many students stay in the state, but also work in the state right, didn't you, you got a percentage of it I remember.



D

David Eisler 03:06

Yes, 93% of our students come from the state of Michigan, and they want to stay in Michigan. They grew up here, they want to raise their families here, they like the climate, they like, you know, the environment of Michigan. So what we do is we graduate students who are ready for success in a career, and they want to stay within the state.

E

Ed Clemente 03:06

And, you know, I think that Ferris was always sort of a niche university, even back when I went there. And that's probably why I'm really excited because I did get two degrees from Ferris, by the way, and I know that you're almost called I wouldn't say a community college, but you do have sort of a community college mentality, at least how would you describe it?

D

David Eisler 03:27

Well, we do offer associate degrees at Ferris. So we're the community college for the five counties that are around us. But I think what we do is we talk about how Ferris is a place where theory meets practice. So we don't just teach you the theory of it, we teach you how to do it, we teach you how to do it with your hands. And we do that with a unique set of degrees that we have, lots of applied degrees. And I think when you think about niche, when you were in school, certainly you were thinking about Professional Golf Management and pharmacy has always been a part of us and optometry is a huge part of it. We're the only optometry program in the state, but I think that continues and so lately you know, think of cutting edge degrees, things like information security and intelligence were we're one of the top programs in the country. And then from that we have the only bachelor's degree in artificial intelligence. But the other degrees we offer, think about applied. We have the best Welding Engineering Technology Degree in the country. We do really unique things like we have a degree in plastic injection molding and nearly all the health profession things so that's a part of the Ferris experiences. We we get your great education but we I also want to prepare you to start off with success in your career. And I think the other part of that is we know that 89% of our graduates get a job in the field that they study. And that's what education should do, should help you benefit from the education you received. You know, and also, I think, you, this is, I'm going to focus on you a little bit. But you are one of the most non-traditional presidents I think I've ever met, or, you know, in my time in the legislature, but can you give the story of how music sort of got you here to Ferris? Well, yes, I'm a graduate of the University of Michigan, I'm from New Jersey, I went to the U of M, played in the band there. And I actually have three degrees in clarinet performance, which is a little bit of unusual background for president. It's, and it's a really interesting fit Ferris because we don't have any music degrees here. So, but parts of my background was working with applied programs and associate degrees, but it is kind of an interesting path.

E

Ed Clemente 06:00

And you still perform and play with the pep band, almost all the sporting events, right?

D

David Fisler 06:07

DAVID EISLER 06:17

I love to play with the pep band. You think about the difference in age between myself and most of our students and music is a great way to come together. I love playing with our students. They're great. They're out there, just having a good time. We're cheering for the team. And so we play at football and volleyball, and both sets of basketball games and at ice hockey. And so it's great fun. And this is my 19th year in the pep band so I think I'm the senior member at this point,

E

Ed Clemente 06:36

Or somebody just can't graduate, right? [That could be it also.] Yeah, I remember that, you know, I think I told you, I played a couple years at Ferris for football. But like, I just remember that the pep band even then, was you know, we didn't have a big marching band when I was there but we became pretty close with the pep band always because they they would provide sometimes our morale, you know, for games and everything. So we do appreciate what you guys do for the sports teams too.

D

David Eisler 07:06

We're not just there to play, we're there to cheer on the team because we're, everyone's there to support the team. And we've had such great athletic success at Ferris lately it's, fun to be at those games.

E

Ed Clemente 07:16

Well, I've got to give you a chance to just plug a couple of those things because I don't want to do too much, but like the national championship for football, just can you just say how exciting that was for you a little bit.

D

David Eisler 07:27

It was an amazing experience. And you know, we've had two national championships at Ferris while I was here, in basketball in 2018 and then the fall 2021 We won the national championship in football, NCAA Division II. And when you have an extraordinary team like that, that goes undefeated actually, we really most of our games in the playoffs were over by halftime and certainly the national championship game was was like that. It's it's quite a remarkable experience. We also we came in second in the nation with Division I hockey in 2012. And this year, we won the conference in volleyball on both in men's and women's basketball. So it's, it's been an it's an extraordinary time for us in athletics. We just have this incredible coaching staff who understands about student athletes and we have we have students who are really committed to being the best and they have been lately which is just fun to see.

E

Ed Clemente 08:20

Yeah. I'm gonna put in a plug for my old coaches. Coach Coso. so I know you knew and Coach

Jedd Folske, both guys that were good role models for a kid that didn't know really where he was going and sports really did help me finish school there too. You know, I got me through the first few years and then I'm like, I'd love to college all of a sudden.

**D** David Eisler 08:38

And we see that here now with with Tony Annese for football and Tia Brandel-Wilhelm for volleyball and, you know Andy Bronkema, Kurt Westendorf for basketball, and of course, Bob Daniels in hockey. We've really been blessed with some some great coaches at Ferris. And that makes all the difference.

**E** Ed Clemente 08:55

Yeah, you know, and even the location of the school, I mean, it's really sort of Big Rapids became sort of my second hometown, especially growing up, you know, as a young adult, and you still have a great relationship with the city, I assume, because we always did a lot with the city to help clean it up. Like some of our dorms, we'd go there and help do park cleanups and things like that.

**D** David Eisler 09:16

Actually Ed, I think we may do even more of this then when you were here. One of the things our students do in the spring is they have something called the Big Event, where they go out in the morning and they they do yard work, they do some minor construction, you know, they'll do 300 houses in Big Rapids and we'll have a couple thousand students to come out and do that. The other piece I would mention about Ferris is beyond what we do here in Big Rapids, we partner with community colleges all across the state. So we partner with 20 community colleges and we offer bachelor completion degrees on their campuses. And these are for students who are place bound and so we don't do every degree there but we do ones that that there's a need for it. So I think we're committed to this idea of opportunity and access.

**A** Announcer 10:05

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**E** Ed Clemente 10:21

And I want to talk about two other sort of things. But one quickly, you have a unique museum there too, which is made national and international news, I think.

**D** David Eisler 10:30

Yes, we're, we're really blessed to have the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia here. It was, it's the life work of our Vice President for Diversity, Inclusion, and Strategic Initiatives, David Pilgrim, and he's collected these things throughout his lifetime. And now we have over 20,000 of these artifacts, and it's a fabulous museum and people who are listening, you can go to our website, and there's a very good online virtual tour, which will give you an introduction. But we encourage you to come and see it firsthand, because it's, it's a stunning display. And really, it's thought provoking a great great asset educationally for helping to teach you about diversity inclusion.

**E** Ed Clemente 11:14

Yeah, no, I know and it's gotten great publicity for you guys even, you know, around the country, I know. Another thing that I found, you know, I've actually was very impressed with how well it's doing, but the Kendall College of Art and Design, and that's in Grand Rapids. And I know, it's a fantastic program, you've got there now, but can you explain to people who don't know what it is what it does?

**D** David Eisler 11:38

Well, sure, in 2001, that Kendall College of Art and Design, which was a private institution, merged with Ferris, so they become a part of our university and we've worked together over this time. And, you know, it's, it's a wonderful institution. Much, many, many degrees in design are there. And they have two contiguous blocks in downtown Grand Rapids and so it's a great relationship that we have, there's a lot of a lot of interaction between between Kendall and ourselves. And it's been a great fit, because we didn't have the programs in art that they did. And so we do some great work together. And it's a it's a real jewel for us in Grand Rapids.

**E** Ed Clemente 12:17

And I think it's a jewel for Grand Rapids, too, because of the building you preserved, right?

**D** David Eisler 12:23

Oh, yes. And you were, you're very instrumental in helping us with that.

**E** Ed Clemente 12:26

That wasn't a plug for me, I just want to make sure any constituents come after me.

**D** David Eisler 12:32

It was a federal building and courthouse, it was the last great public building in Grand Rapids. And you helped us get the historical tax credits, which made the building possible in a public private partnership. This was a building built in 1909 that we restored, and it is a fabulous

thing. And to see our Kendall students walking through this restored building, and to see how proud they are of being there is really a great thing. And when you think about sustainability, the most sustainable building is, is the one that you don't tear down and you don't build because it's already there. And so we're I actually have a small office there. And it is, it is a great project, one of my favorite projects all time at Ferris.

**E** Ed Clemente 13:14

Yeah, I actually went to it when that legislation was going on, because I was also helping the Center for, or College for Creative Studies. And I did tour it when it was still not in good shape, you know, before you guys even got the legislation through. But I remember you gave me a little tour of it. I don't for you directly, but someone from your staff did.

**D** David Eisler 13:31

Well you must come back and see it now and see, see what you helped us accomplish.

**E** Ed Clemente 13:35

Well, everyone should go see it. It's a great thing for Ferris. And I'm sure being that Grand Rapids market helps you get, you know, good students, and it's probably giving you more diversity too down there.

**D** David Eisler 13:45

And now, UICA, which is a contemporary arts museum that has also merged with with Kendall. So we've even expanded beyond that.

**E** Ed Clemente 13:53

Why don't you talk a little bit too about some of the legacy, like you talked about the fundraising, but I think that's a big success story of how you did some really unique fundraising to get the university in a good position?

**D** David Eisler 14:05

Well, we're fortunate that we have alumni who truly care about our university. And when you visit with them, often what they say, 'if it weren't for Ferris,' and so building relationships with people, it's been very successful for us. And we're putting the finishing touches on a comprehensive campaign where we raised \$120 million. And part of that has been the Ferris Future Scholarship Challenge Endowment, where we took \$18 million, we used that as matching funds and so anyone who created a new endowment or gave to an existing endowment, we would double their money. And we receive that \$80 million as a refund from the state or what we have prepaid in terms of MPERS. And so we were able to take those

dollars for that purpose. And we've created pretty close to 250 new scholarship endowments and you think about something we should do, we should create these type of scholarship funds that will go on forever and support students long after all of us are gone from here. And that's that's just a great legacy for any student. And a lot of donors have done that, my wife and I have and it really gives you a good feeling that to know that you've done something that's going to make a difference for students for a long time in the future.

E

Ed Clemente 15:19

And the legacies they carry on even though your name might not be attached to how they got there, it's just the right thing to do, period.

D

David Eisler 15:27

It absolutely is, and you know, what I hear from students when they receive these endowments, is first they're very grateful for the funds, but they're also incredibly honored that someone would support them. And their response to that is, is really, really fun to watch and to put them with their donors who made those gifts.

E

Ed Clemente 15:47

And you know, one other thing and you sort of another question, but I think you alluded to this a little bit, but you really have a good handle, I think, from all the experience, you know, and everything about where the future is going to be, trends, challenges, can you kind of conceptualize that for people where they should be positioning themselves or what you think it's going to be?

D

David Eisler 16:10

Of course, I think one of the things that concerns me sometimes is the idea that people don't need to go to college. And certainly there are many great jobs you can get with an apprentice or an associate degree, but the earning potential increases, the better your education. And so there's never a better investment in yourself than going to college. So you start with that. I think the other piece that has to go with that is you need to learn how to work because learning isn't just those years, when you're in college, you have to continue to learn because the professions are changing so quickly. And the information we have is out of date. And so being able to be a self-directed learning is something I think it's incredibly important, however you get to that, whether it's by reading, whether it's a mentor, college, or if it's going back for a certificate or an advanced degree, I really encourage that because it increases your chances for success and helps you help you have a greater future.

E

Ed Clemente 17:06

You know, you also told me something else, which I thought was fascinating and I might misquote you, but I think you said about every five years, you have 25 new programs, or you turnover? Can you explain that a little bit?



turnover? Can you explain that a little bit?

D

David Eisler 17:17

Absolutely, of all places I've worked in higher education, this is my 47th year in higher ed, there's never been a place like Ferris State University in terms of creating new degrees over over my presidency. In the space of 25 years, the space of five years, our faculty created 25 new degrees, which is a fabulous thing. People don't have that impression about higher ed, but when you think about creating that many new degrees, in the same time, they're eliminating 27 to 29 degrees, so we don't have this degree creep, but they're also revising curricula and keeping our degrees cutting edge. And I think that's a piece about higher ed that isn't told enough about how committed faculty are to being state of the art, and they're going out and doing these new things. It's really exciting to be around people who do that.

E

Ed Clemente 18:05

Well, I you know, I used to run a chamber of commerce and I was involved in a Workforce Board and that was always the big challenge is that people get to concreted into foundational logic that they've used forever. And to be able to see, I always tell this about futurism, futurism isn't predicting the future, it's about creating a series of options and programs that people can at least adjust and move around as they go through their own careers and continuous learning like you say.

D

David Eisler 18:36

Ed, that's true. And you think about the things that have changed, you know, just over the last couple of years. Who could have predicted the Great Recession, who could have predicted this change in technology and the things that are possible for us, the growth of social media? We don't see those things always coming, but we can prepare people so that they have options when they do.

E

Ed Clemente 18:56

Yeah, you know, and you sort of touched on this just a teeny bit, but you, you give a lot of career advice, but I think you also do a lot of commencement speeches. And is there anything sort of you feel like, as a go to thing that really universally doesn't change a lot beyond what you've already told us? You know, is for advice.

D

David Eisler 19:19

Well, thanks, thanks for asking that question. One of the things I do at commencement, is I tell students stories. I think I've done 122 commencements at Ferris now, and there's something in what our students do to overcome challenges to excel, to go around obstacles to find themselves, and I think it's that story of the human spirit of that, that desire to be better that I think is really embedded in the college experience. When you spend a lifetime working in

higher ed, you really learn to appreciate students in the value, the changes that happened in their lives when they're here and I think that's the reason that we do this, it's because we see the difference that education makes for our students.

E

Ed Clemente 20:05

Yeah. And it's not always easy to conceptualize that for anybody on the outside because if you haven't had a family, like my family, we didn't have a big college, no one with the college in my family. So that's the sort of advice I think people need to hear at all levels. But we appreciate you doing that, and all the service you've given there. Now, this is something, because you've lived here, you're from New Jersey, so you've been in Michigan quite a while now. Do you have any sort of favorite places you like to go to or visit or festivals that you'd like to mention?

D

David Eisler 20:38

Oh, we love Big Rapids, and so one of the things we haven't Big Rapids, we have a Festival of the Arts in February, where we have 50 events during the month of February. I certainly like to go to Grand Rapids, I love the Grand Rapids Symphony, I sit on their board. And we have some great art institutions, building on Kendall was the Grand Rapids Art Museum and Art Prize. Grand Rapids is just become an absolutely great community for the arts and, you know, for culture, and great food. So we frequently are in Grand Rapids and we're in Lansing some, I spend a fair amount of time in Lansing, working with the legislature. It's always a pleasure to be in our state capitol and it's such such a historic building. And there's so many things that are happening in Lansing. So those are some of the places I like to go.

E

Ed Clemente 21:25

You know, I should mention, my degree was in public administration. In my first, I never went to the capitol as a kid growing up, but it was in the public administration program at Ferris, that I went there for the first time. And that's kind of when I knew I wanted to be a legislator someday was because of that Ferris experience. You know, and I just feel like, you know, I know that same a-ha moment for a lot of college kids but at least mine was at Ferris and I appreciate what Ferris has done. We should mention one other thing, we keep talking about Ferris, but Woodbridge N. Ferris, I think was a former governor of Michigan too, right?

D

David Eisler 22:00

He was indeed. Mr. Ferris started our institution in 1884. He was elected governor of the state of Michigan twice 1912 and 1914. And what I tell folks when I visit with them in Lansing is his portrait is the last one on the right hand side before you walk into the House Chamber. So go by and say hi to Mr. Ferris, because I do and Mr. Ferris was elected United States Senate 1922 and passed away in 1928 serving there. He was a great American, a remarkable founder and we're incredibly proud of our traditions and of Mr. Ferris. We think the work that we do about opportunity, about applied education, about learning by doing, we really trace that back to Mr. & Mrs. Ferris.

E

Ed Clemente 22:43

I have my picture when I was in the legislature by that portrait, just so you know. Well, anyway, I think that I appreciate this President Dave Eisler, Doctor, we appreciate all the work you've done for the state of Michigan as well as Ferris and, and all the music you've given us too, by the way. And your radio guy. So you have a perfect voice for our show today as well. But thank you very much, David, for doing this today. And thank you for all the good work you've done for the state and Ferris.

D

David Eisler 23:12

Well Ed, thanks so much for having me having me as a guest. It was great to reconnect with you. And I really appreciate the work that you and the MEDC are doing. Thanks so very much.

E

Ed Clemente 23:21

Well, as you know, a lot of people that work here, including Kyle that's going to be doing this podcast and the editing is a graduate of Ferris as well. And I know a lot of my other friends who I work with are pharmacists and everything else ophthalmologists, they're all still in the field. So keep up the good work. [Go Dogs] Join us next week where our guest will be Michelle Bekkering, National Engagement Director for US Global Leadership Coalition, where we learn from a national platform about economic development and diplomacy.

A

Announcer 23:52

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