

# LIFE LESSONS: the presidency with a small 'p'

By David L. Eisler

*This speech is an excerpt from President Eisler's lecture at AASCU's 2018 Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 30. A tradition at the AASCU Annual Meeting for more than 30 years, the President-to-Presidents lecture is a signal honor bestowed by the AASCU Board of Directors on one of its colleagues.*

**A**s we share this time together, I encourage you to reflect on your own presidency. I think back to our inauguration, when we included a composition by composer Bill Douglas, "I Shall Not Live in Vain," based on a poem by Emily Dickinson:

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain;  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.*

My intent was to emphasize the importance of encouraging the success of every student. Little did I understand that in some of the challenges a president can encounter, sometimes the heart one saves from breaking is your own.

This is my 43<sup>rd</sup> year in higher education, my 16<sup>th</sup> as president at Ferris. What some expect of a president is almost a Hollywood stereotype—the articulate speaker, blessed with a charismatic personality, leading a Lake Wobegon University where all the faculty, staff and students are above average. In these remarks, I will work to suggest a different course, the effectiveness of a presidency with a small "p."

As public people, presidents receive plenty of attention. When possible I deflect the positive attention to others. On stage, I use the opportunity to share the spotlight, recognizing others. In celebrating accomplishments, I place the focus on our work, rather than my work. After all, if we're dependent on my abilities, we will most certainly be limited. Taking this a step further, I believe if it is right, someone else should receive the credit. If it is wrong, it is my fault.

I was the first in our family to attend college and remember well when we went to look at universities. We drove from New Jersey to Ann Arbor in our '64 Ford Falcon to visit the University of Michigan. We went straight to the School of Music. We started to look around, but it was clear we were strangers. A faculty member leading a chamber rehearsal noticed us and walked our way. He introduced himself and inquired if we wanted to see the school. He gave us a tour and helped us feel at home. After this,

my mother said, “You should go to the University of Michigan, they care about students here.” This experience was less than 20 minutes, but it changed my life. We never know when we might do the same for someone else. Make time for people.

As presidents, we tend to talk much more than we listen. Every four to five years, I host listening sessions with faculty and staff and ask three questions:

- ◆ What do you cherish most about Ferris and would least like to lose?
- ◆ What are the three biggest challenges at Ferris?
- ◆ If you were president at Ferris, what would be the three most important things to do?

During the dialogue, I take notes and keep quiet even if I disagree with what is said. While a large time commitment, it is valuable and enjoyable. There is much to learn, and patterns emerge that I wouldn't discover any other way. *Learn to enjoy listening.*

*Even the most successful of presidencies is a challenge.* Think about what you faced last year or the problems you confront now. While we often draw attention to the positives, higher education comes with significant challenges. If ignored, they can become overwhelming. And one of the realities of higher education is that in times of challenge, the tendency for university communities is to circle the wagons and shoot inward.

One lesson learned is that many people think they know what is best for higher education and eagerly offer their advice. This reminds me of a paraphrased quote from H.L. Menken, “**For every complex problem there is an answer that is simple, clear and wrong.**”

Many of the problems we confront do not have simple solutions. The decisions we face are not always win-win. The reality is sometimes we have two choices: bad and worse. When you can't make things better, try not to make them worse. On difficult issues, you learn to not duck. A difficult situation nuanced or avoided usually becomes worse over time.

*Remember, we can all come together around students.*

They often represent where we find common ground. Beginning with my first commencement, I've shared our students' stories—the young man whose parents fled Cuba with him on a raft made of oil drums; the nurse working on her master's degree, one class at a time because of brain cancer treatment; the veteran with PTSD, pursuing his social work degree to

help others suffering. What our students overcome to earn their degrees is the triumph of the human spirit. These stories have become a part of our tradition, and we celebrate them together.

*What are your opportunities?* These might be in areas you least imagine. During my interview for Ferris, one question was, “What is your position on athletics?” I have no earthly idea what possessed me to answer, “Well I'm a musician, I play in the band, and when it comes to athletics, I'm usually last chosen.”

To my surprise, athletics have become a point of pride. We're a Division II school with Division I hockey. In 2012, we reached the Frozen Four and finished second in the nation.

This fall our football team is undefeated and second in the nation; women's volleyball is in the top 10; and women's soccer in the top 15. Last year, men's tennis and golf finished in the top eight, and our men's basketball team won the national championship. My contribution here? I do what I can do, I play in the band and my wife, Patsy, helps the officials.

Until the drug abuse and doping in cycling were exposed, Lance Armstrong was someone I admired and whose teamwork provided examples on how a university might be led. On the Tour de France, he would remain in the pack, drafting behind his team as they preserved his strength. He would emerge from this group in the mountains, tackling an arduous ascent, climbing faster than his competitors. In the individual time trials, he would pedal faster than nearly everyone. Working with his team he created an insurmountable lead, but at critical times did what others could not do. I believe this metaphor works for the presidency. Much work should be done by our teams. Part of our discipline is to look for the work others can do, delegating both

the responsibility and authority to do so while avoiding the urge to help. This frees up time, so you can focus on the work that only you can do.

*Find those times when you can make an important difference.* Several years ago, I returned from vacation to wonderful news. With state pension liabilities becoming a part of our balance sheet, actuaries had to review our contributions to the system. We had overpaid \$18 million and would receive a check from the state for this amount. The pressure to put these funds toward our future pension liabilities was strong. It was my opinion that these funds should be used for students. Our Board of Trustees agreed and sent the funds to our foundation to form an \$18 million scholarship endowment. The foundation board agreed to make \$3



President Eisler delivers the President-to-Presidents Lecture during AASCU's 2018 Annual Meeting.



million of this available each year for six years to match gifts to new and existing scholarship endowments. We are on track to double this windfall into \$36 million in endowed scholarships.

*Be aspirational; help people dream.* How do you unite your campus and supporters for a common cause? The AASCU board chair, Dana Hoyt, identified this well in the theme for this conference, “Our Role in Delivering America’s Promise.” In looking at the future of our state and its changing demographics, I was convinced we had to change to meet these challenges.

In Robert Putnam’s book, *Our Kids*, there is an analysis of how economic background can be a greater determinant of college success than academic ability. Using eighth-grade math scores, students who score in the bottom third of the top economic quartile are more likely to succeed in college than those of the top third in the bottom economic quartile. This goes so very much against the American dream of opportunity through education that I believe in and benefitted from.

We made this the centerpiece of discussions both on and off campus. What I learned was that it was not Putnam’s solutions we would embrace, but our own. Through the Advancemos program, we offer summer academic experiences for middle school youth. Our Promesa program provides free summer college classes for at-risk juniors and seniors at their high school. Our Latin@ Center provides a home for these students when they come to Ferris, and we support these college Promesa Scholars through a new \$1 million endowment.

*Seek advice; when it is helpful, use a coach.* The reality is we often don’t know what we don’t know. The more I do this work, the more willing I am to turn to others for assistance. I’ve found it very helpful to have a coach, someone who advises only me. Be willing to pay for this—free advice may be worth what you pay for it.

I had the opportunity to work with Ed Penson and benefitted greatly from his many years of assistive conferring. Today I sit on the board of AASCU-Penson Associates, and I encourage you to use this invaluable resource. Over time, I’ve received consulting advice from George Mehaffy, Dave McFarland, Ed Penson, John Moore, Patty Cormier, Ken Dobbins and others. They have made an important difference for me.

*Take care of yourself.* There comes a time when you realize that working more or harder will not make the university better. I encourage you to look at your schedule and to claim back some of that time. Set aside an hour every day for you, not for your work. I choose to make this a time for exercise. It gives me opportunity to think without interruptions and distractions.

Take vacation. As president, I never took much vacation, and certainly never an extended one, until Ed Penson finally said, “Dave, you’re just too stubborn. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for the people who work with you. If you don’t take vacation, they will feel like they shouldn’t either, and they have lives and family.” That resonated with me.

One of my favorite movies is the political comedy *Dave*. In this, the president of the United States becomes incapacitated and a double takes his place. He turns out to be very successful, but the man behind

the scheme plots to expose him. In the penultimate scene in front of a joint session of Congress, Kevin Kline shares these great reminders of the personal integrity presidents need:

- ◆ I should care more about you than I care about me.
- ◆ I should care more about what is right, rather than what is popular.
- ◆ I ought to be willing to give this whole thing up for something I believe in.
- ◆ And if I’m not, maybe I don’t belong here in the first place.

If you remember nothing else, please consider this: If you have a spouse or partner in your presidency, make him or her your highest priority, not your work. He or she makes so many sacrifices for you. There will be a day when you are no longer a president.

Start today to be different. The next time you pick up your phone for that message that can’t wait, stop and send your spouse or partner an “I love you” message. Watch the difference this makes not just for her or him, but for you. You’ll be very glad you did.

*A presidency with a small “p”* means finding the way you use your unique abilities, background and experience to lead your university. Try not to be the one with all the answers. Your team will never reach its full potential if you do.

It is an honor to help shape the path of a consequential university and to see the difference the collective efforts your faculty, staff and you make in people’s lives. I thank you for the work you do and for this opportunity to visit with you.

Thanks so very much. **P**

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