

A GREAT PLACE

TO LEARN • TO WORK • TO CALL HOME

MY VISION FOR FAIRMONT STATE UNIVERSITY

by President Mike Davis

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FAIRMONT STATE
UNIVERSITY™

When my family and I decided the time was right to explore leadership positions in higher education, I knew the kind of school I wanted to lead. And when I first saw the announcement that Fairmont State University was looking for a new president, I told them: “This is the one!”

Fairmont State is a public university, it is in a beautiful location, it is the right size, and it is close to lots of neat places. So, it checked a lot of boxes, but many other universities met those criteria as well.

As I did my research, I discovered something else about Fairmont State University, the city of Fairmont, Marion and Harrison Counties, and the state of West Virginia that called to me and set it apart from the other opportunities: Unlimited potential for greatness.

Over the past nine months I have supported and listened to you, and what you have told me, loud and clear, is that you need Fairmont State University to be great. For the good of our students, faculty, and staff. And we need to be great for the good of our alumni, our communities, and our state.

We are ready for this moment—all we have to do is believe we are worthy. Worthy of greatness. Fairmont State University must be the best regional university in the state.

But what does it mean to be ‘the best’? What makes a university great? We will answer these questions together through strategic planning. I urge you to engage in this process, and to share your ideas and aspirations via unit-, division-, and university-level sessions.

When I say we must be a great place to learn, what do I mean? Many of you have heard me talk about my own journey as a college student. I struggled when I first got to college until I found my place. I went to a big university, so finding that was happenstance, but once I found my place, I found my people—people who would advocate for me every step of the way.

I would not be standing here today if I had not, through fortune alone, found my people. At Fairmont State University, we are not going to rely on luck. We must work every single day to make sure that every student who walks through our doors has what they need to be successful and that they know we have their backs.

We must have groundbreaking programs and cutting-edge facilities to implement them. If we are going to fulfill the promise that we have made to our students, to prepare them for the world, then we must continue to adapt and find ways to grow and innovate.

It also means we must find ways to engage students outside of the classroom. In our theaters, on our athletic fields, in our residence halls, in the Falcon Center, and in every corner of campus. We must listen to our students and hear what they love about the world and then find every way possible to support them.

And we must do it in a way that ensures that a college education remains accessible and attainable for every student who wants to obtain their degree. Compared to other universities, Fairmont State University's programs and our facilities present tremendous value and we plan to keep it that way.

Our students are a constant reminder of why the work we do every day on this campus is so important. Our students are brilliant and motivated, driven and caring, and some of the most engaged students I have ever seen.

I told the first-year class this year that college students get a bad rap. We hear that they are disengaged, self-centered, and only care about themselves. I told them I did not buy it. And I said, "I don't care what a bunch of people who aren't invested in your successes think about you." And I have challenged students every day to show up and prove the naysayers wrong.

I told them all they had to do was show up ready to be challenged and engaged and we would have their back. And they are showing up. Every time I turn around there are students asking to be involved and asking to be taken seriously. So, every day we will find ways to answer that call, and truly make Fairmont State a great place to learn.

Our students are not the only people on our campus who make us special. Fairmont State University must also be a great place to work. We cannot serve our students, our community, and the world of higher education if we do not have faculty and staff who feel they have purpose and know that their work is valuable. Who feel they are valued.

How do we accomplish that? The value of our faculty and staff cannot be measured by compensation alone. However, if we are the best regional public in the state, we must work to make sure our salaries reflect that distinction.

We also need to demonstrate that we value our employees in other ways. First, by respecting expertise. Every single person who works on our campus has expertise in the areas where they work. That expertise must be respected and when we need to solve problems on campus the solutions cannot start in my office. They must emerge from the people who are doing the work every day.

So, we are going to find ways to empower those who work on our campus. If the university is going to make changes, then you should have a say in what those changes look like. You will not always get what you want, but you should always feel like you have had a chance to express your opinion and share your experiences.

We must also find ways to help people continue to develop. We are an educational institution and I take the idea of lifelong learning very seriously. I know that I will be a better president in five years than I am today, not only because experience is a great teacher, but also because I have worked hard to build connections around the country with people who I can share ideas with and learn from.

It is critical that every single person who works on our campus has the opportunity to grow professionally. This means we must invest in you. We are going to launch several programs to grow the capacity of our existing talent and we are going to invest in making sure that every one of our employees has what they need to grow professionally and personally.

I know this campus is a vital place for our students, faculty, and staff, but they are not the only ones who call this place home. So, what does it mean when I say this is a great place to call home?

When I first set foot on this campus back in May during my interview, I got the sense that the university was not just a collection of buildings on a hill, but that this place really matters. It matters to alumni who built lifelong relationships here; it matters to a community that longs for genuine partnerships; it matters to students who need a safe place to learn; and it matters to faculty and staff who want to feel like they are making a difference.

Fairmont State University must remain a place that matters. For our alumni, it is our duty to welcome you back often, to carefully steward your gifts to make this a great place, and above all, to listen to you. I absolutely loved hearing your stories of what mattered to you when you were here.

I have also heard those ways that you feel we may have lost those connections with you. We must find ways to make sure our alumni always feel at home on campus. Sure, this means tailgates and alumni reunions, but it also means building partnerships between our current students and their counterparts from previous generations. I know our alumni will jump at the chance—every time I mention a project that we need help with, I am met with an alum saying, “Whatever you need.” It is true what they say: “Once a Falcon, always a Falcon.”

Many of our alumni have remained in the community after graduation, and their presence is part of what makes the City of Fairmont and the surrounding areas such great places to live. But Fairmont State has its part to play in that, too. If we are a public university, we must serve the public.

We must prepare to build a better world together. If we are going to be great, then the community must see us as a resource and a partner that they can count on. The great part about a university is that we have the resources to impact how a community grows, how a community engages, and how a community sees themselves. We cannot be successful if the community around us is not successful, and vice versa.

Universities are interesting places because there are these big, impressive buildings and beautiful grounds. I have always loved wandering around a college campus and seeing how they are laid out. I have learned over the years that a college campus is so much more than its physical attributes.

There is a feeling to a college campus, too. Each campus has its own sense, and the best ones feel hopeful. They are places where people are not afraid to dream—where people feel secure enough to share their audacious aspirations. People on the best college campuses believe that their greatest days are yet to come. Fairmont State must be that kind of place.

With every passing day, I keep coming back to the question we asked at the launch of our strategic planning process: “What kind of society do we want to live in?”

I want to live in a society that helps people reach their potential. I was a debate coach for 25 years and part of me will still always think of myself as a coach. The thing I loved best about being a coach was not the winning. Instead, it was guiding people to accomplish something they had never dreamed was possible.

I want to live in a society where people feel supported. It is amazing what people can accomplish when someone says to them, “I know you can do this,” or, “Let me show you the way.” My greatest mentors saw something in me and pushed me to pursue it. And in the process, they demonstrated an important truth: Blind platitudes are not helpful; rather, effective support consists of the honest belief that if someone is willing to put in the work, they can not only achieve their goals, but they can also be greater than even they imagined.

I want to live in a society where we believe tomorrow will be better than today. I know for many people it does not feel that way, and I think we have to be at the center of turning that perception around for them.

We can become this type of society, but it is going to take all of us working together: Students, staff, faculty, alumni, our Board of Governors, our friends in the legislature, and our community partners. Furthermore, not only can we do it, but as a regional public university in Appalachia, we are uniquely obligated to do so.

I know in my heart that the moment for the regional public university is here...and that means Fairmont State's moment is right now. We can do things that giant flagship schools and private schools with exorbitant tuitions are not designed for. Access to education, innovative learning, caring service, quality academic programs, bright people, and supportive communities are our cornerstones. And it can only happen at a great place like Fairmont State University.

We are founded on a rock-solid mission of service to the public, yet we are nimble and flexible enough to serve the needs of humanity. We fuse traditional academic rigor with hands on learning, so students leave here ready not just for their first jobs but also for their careers. The combination is rare, and sorely needed in today's society. Fairmont State will answer the call because we understand that this is our moment.

This is a great place because it is driven by great people. I promise to spend the rest of my career making sure that we seize the moment in front of us and reach our full potential as an institution and as individuals.

As the Strategic Planning Process advances, I invite all of you—students, faculty, staff, alumni, Board of Governors, community members—to share what it means to you for Fairmont State to be a Great Place to learn, to work, and to call home. To identify challenges and opportunities to achieve your vision of greatness. And to clarify how your recommendations will help create the kind of society you want to live in.

Together, we will seize this moment. Together, we will chart our future. Together, we will achieve greatness. The future of Fairmont State University has never been brighter.

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