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UNIVERSITY

A Message from the President

January 18, 2023

Dear FDU Faculty and Staff,

As I am sure you would agree, the hallmark of Fairleigh Dickinson University has always been our ability to provide personalized interactions and support to our students, our colleagues and our communities. Now more than ever, this personal approach to our students and to our day-to-day interactions within our community is essential and paramount to our institutional success. Much evidence points to students needing greater levels of support to navigate academic, social and mental health challenges. Additionally, the past several years of disruption have also taken their toll on our community of faculty and staff as well. I believe that the time is right to begin thinking about how we can return to prioritizing a caring, committed culture and community here at FDU and to adapt our thinking to prepare us to navigate these challenges.

Our strategic plan will certainly be driven by our personal commitment to our students and will feature many transformational initiatives that we believe will strengthen our caring and cohesive community. The latest draft of the plan has been shared with faculty and administrative leaders and will soon be widely distributed within the community for feedback and then discussed at upcoming town halls. Please look for more information on that soon.

FDU CARES

In the meantime, though, there are other efforts that we can take part in to further enhance the personal and transformational culture that has long defined our University. Several decades ago, FDU launched an FDU CARES campaign, focusing our attention on what we do best: providing a nurturing, transformational learning environment where students succeed and colleagues thrive amidst a supportive culture. I believe that there is a new opportunity here to relaunch our message that **FDU CARES**, focusing our attention on providing **Courteous, Accurate, Respectful, Empathic** and **Student-Centered** approaches to our work. As we prepare to launch this new campaign, I will look to our community members to develop initiatives and help lead them.

Soon, I will be holding **small group listening sessions** over breakfast with a cross-section of our faculty and staff. Invitations will start to be extended shortly and we will seek to include as many community members as possible in a timely manner. I hope in these forums to eventually sit with and hear from all who are interested in sharing their ideas about how we can implement our vision of student-centeredness in new ways for a new generation of students.

Additionally, we will be assembling a “**transformation team,**” made up of stakeholders from across the University community who will lead the implementation of new programs and initiatives that will help prepare our institution for its future. This group will be made up of members inside and outside the institution who will consider a wide variety of efforts that can enhance our operations and our programs to help us transform more students’ lives.

We will soon be rolling out a number of key initiatives to provide support and training for our community as we focus our attention on building an empathic community and culture. The [Center for Empathy Research and Training \(CERT\)](#), led by School of Psychology and Counseling Director Benjamin Freer, will begin providing empathy training to our University community at large following an initial pilot, focusing on how we can more effectively provide empathic responses to others as we offer support.

We will also be rolling out a **Mental Health First Aid Training** and a number of other key mental health and wellness support services for our community as we seek to more effectively support our students’ success. This will implement a nationally recognized program that takes the fear and hesitation out of starting conversations about mental health or substance use by improving understanding and providing an action plan that teaches people to safely and responsibly identify and address any potential issues.

And, we will continue to work with and prioritize the effort to ensure our students continue their education through graduation, which is the focus of our **Retention Council**, co-chaired by Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students Uchenna Baker and Chair of the Department of Social Sciences and History Gary Darden. The council is developing a comprehensive action plan that provides multiple layers of support for students in need to assure that we maximize their chances for success at FDU.

I am excited to continue to build a community that is focused on what is paramount to our institutional success; one where we focus on providing the support, care and commitment to each other and to our students to make FDU a destination of choice for the personal care that leads to transformational success. I look forward to engaging with you to listen, learn and help fulfill our visions.

Thank you.

Michael J. Avaltroni, Ph.D.
Interim President