Crisis in Higher Education, delivered at the Grand Rapids Rotary Club on April 16, 1981

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Thank-you for inviting me to talk to you this noon about the present crisis in higher education. Even in the best of times most of us have immediate personal concerns to occupy our attention. We tend to skip over those that don’t clearly affect us right at the moment.

Nonetheless, I know most of you have given some attention to the discussion in Washington about plans to cut federal funds for public broadcasting, the arts, science research and educational programs, and loans and grants to students. You are also aware to a degree of the substantial reduction in Michigan's support for its public colleges and universities this past year.

For a few minutes we will concentrate on the particular crisis in higher education. This subject needs your attention because higher education, just as elementary and secondary education,
agriculture, business and industry, religion, recreation, and politics will affect the quality of the society and economy in which you live.

Before I state the problem, let me assure you that I believe we in education will share our portion of the state's economic misery without unreasonable complaint. There are some of us who believe that there must be restraint in spending and tax reform on the federal and state levels even as we seek public support for our institutions that we believe serve in the public interest.

Throughout our country there has been a cry for less taxation, for "cutting the fat" out of government. Many citizens of Michigan support that cause and take satisfaction in the fact the state must reduce its services. There can be little satisfaction, however, when Michigan's weak economy forces these reductions. It is said,
"When the American economy catches a cold, Michigan comes down with pneumonia." In 1980 Michigan caught the worst case of economic pneumonia in nearly 50 years, and recovery is slow.

What implications do the Michigan economy and federal spending cuts hold for the public colleges and universities in our state? Since October some of our universities and colleges have reduced budgets by 10 to 15%. Others are in the painful process of determining where to cut. This coupled with a 12% inflation rate reveals the drastic reduction in purchasing power. Whether or not one takes satisfaction in this "belt tightening," experienced professional people can have sympathy for the severity of the management problem, and the effect such "cut backs" have on students, faculty and staff. Lay-offs run to the hundreds. At Grand Valley 44 people were given notices, and 36 more had their compensation reduced; 80 people and
the lives of their dependents affected out of a total force of 500.

This I surmise is typical throughout the state since all institutions received the same percentage reduction.

The lack of new revenue, and an actual loss in the amount of dollars received this year compared to last, caused a serious problem in education that may not engender much sympathy outside academia, but causes tensions to rise within. In the 1960's and 1970's, as society's requirements for educated people expanded in specialized fields and students' interests changed, there were dollars available to accommodate them. This could be done without major dislocations.

In the hard times now upon us, priorities are reassessed, and choices made. Many universities find themselves with more faculty than they need in one field, and hard pressed by student demand to find qualified faculty in another. When resources
become scarce, can tenured faculty be removed in fields of study where they are not needed, and the recovered resources used to appoint faculty where they are? This question is or will rend whatever consensus exists on most campuses. It is essentially a question of what tenure means, and this is an issue important to the greater society because it will determine in part the kind and quality of education available to the public.

On the federal level the debate continues. Student grants and loans for college education could be cut by as much as 636 million dollars - with the so-called middle income families being hardest hit.

These families had been included in aid programs as inflation and recession were impeding their ability to help finance a college education on their own. Without financial aid it has become difficult for a family earning between $20,000 and $25,000 a year to spend four to seven thousand dollars for a college education. Some estimate
that over three quarter's of a million students already in good standing in colleges and universities will have to drop out next fall if the student aid program is cut so drastically. If this happens, the budgets of both public and private colleges will be further impaired by lower student tuition income.

There are other aspects of the problem but the ones I have described, though universal, have the most impact on our local colleges. Until now I have tried to be a relatively impartial narrator presenting to you the dimensions of a problem.

From now on I will heed an editorial in THE DETROIT FREE PRESS that addresses the plight of higher education and concludes, "The universities can and must step out with new boldness to assert both their needs and their potential contribution to the welfare of the state." That is good advice and a fair request.
First, I want to talk about contributions, then about needs, and finally about directions for the future.

A democratic society will survive and make progress if its citizens know their heritage, and are aware of the mistakes and successes of their history. They must know also the language of their society, and understand at least partially the language of science and mathematics.

To read, to write, and to calculate is to stimulate the mind to thought. Thought breeds intelligence and intelligence, thought. The quality of our thought and our intelligence will to a great degree determine our destiny. This is what higher education is about. Does this sound too abstract, too impractical? Let me try to make my point in practical terms.

We want doctors and nurses who are able to provide outstanding care for the health of the people -- that takes thought and intelligence.
We want engineers to construct systems and structures that are technically sound, and free us from unnecessary labor.

We want teachers who know, enjoy, and successfully communicate the subject they teach.

We want businessmen and industrialists who have the knowledge and instinct to make sound decisions so that there will be jobs, profits and useful products.

We want scientists to invent, to open the way for a sane use of our resources, and to continually discover and explain the wonders of our planet and the universe.

We want spiritual leaders, philosophers, and psychologists whose insight and knowledge help us to a better understanding of ourselves and others.

We want artists who express without words beauty and truth that are necessary to the human experience, and writers and playwrights who
do the same with words.

We want people who intelligently and fairly make our laws, administer justice, represent legal positions, organize and direct both public and private interest groups, disseminate information and opinion, and manage our public affairs.

Colleges and universities perform a major role in preparing people to use their talents in the ways I have described. You have a right to expect your colleges and universities to do just that.

You have a right to expect that the knowledge gained through study and research on college and university campuses is available to government and private enterprise to improve cities, agriculture, health, communication, personal understanding, and other noble human endeavors.

You have a right to expect that educators will stress issues of value and questions of ethics even as they deal with the hard
facts of knowledge.

You have a right to expect that there will be equitable access to higher education for all qualified people who want to stretch their minds, expand their spirits, and improve their capabilities in the world of work.

You have a right to expect the colleges and universities to provide the kinds of public services that enhance life -- such as the television station and assistance to the teachers in elementary and secondary schools.

You have a right to expect that all of this be done with good quality, and at a cost that can be justified. I believe the colleges and universities both public and private have been worthy of the dollars invested in them by the people of Michigan. There are over 986,000 living graduates of our public institutions alone, most of whom live and work in Michigan. Can you imagine the state without
them? Last year 514,488 students were enrolled in state public and private senior and junior colleges. The number is expected to be higher this year. Here at Grand Valley State, one of the smaller state institutions, over 10,000 people were enrolled last year.

Judging by the number and diversity of people involved in education, the number of public agencies and private enterprises that seek assistance from faculty specialists, and judging by the people who appreciate public television and other services, it seems clear that the people of Michigan want strong colleges and universities. What then, must be done to meet their needs, and how hard hit are they by the present recession in Michigan?

Higher education was hurt by the recent cutbacks. It was hurt but not devastated. It can absorb this blow, but I doubt if it can sustain many more of the same severity.
To cope with the future, I suggest the following course for your consideration.

1) The people of Michigan must understand the contribution of higher education, evaluate it, and set a priority for it. In the 1960's Michigan was one of the nation's leaders in appropriating tax dollars for higher education. In the last two years Michigan dropped to 49th out of 50 states in per capita appropriation for higher education. With the recent reduction we may now be 50th. During the 1970's the share of Michigan's budget that went for higher education decreased by 33%. These are startling facts and reveal that higher education has lost its place in Michigan's list of priorities. The people should know this. Such a decision should not be made by default. I think the future economic and social health of our society depends in part on higher education. The share of the state's budget for higher education should be set and maintained through good
2) The public must be made aware of the high quality work that is accomplished at its colleges and universities. These next years will not be easy. Within the academic community the problem that I defined earlier in my remarks will cause disagreement and dissension on the campuses. But higher education is too important to dismiss because of the bad news you may read or hear. As we work through our problems there will continue to be admirable achievements that are important. For instance, in our case, you may read about collapsing domes and student demonstrations protesting budget cuts, but you are not necessarily aware that five out of the seven graduating classes in Grand Valley’s School of Nursing scored highest in the state-wide nursing tests given to all Michigan nursing graduates. This is a compliment to a fine faculty and a medical community, especially hospital staffs, that provide the education. You are not
aware that this year the Master’s Degree candidates in accounting at the Seidman College of Business at Grand Valley scored highest in the state when sitting for the CPA exam, and the accounting undergraduates scored third.

Are you aware that the Chemistry Department is accepted into membership of the American Chemical Society, the Music and Art Departments especially accredited - all marks of high quality. Are you aware that Grand Valley doubles the national average for acceptance of graduates into medical and other health related professional schools?

These achievements and many others I can’t take time to mention you should know because they, along with the achievements of other colleges and universities who send their alumni to our local area, do make a qualitative difference.

The image-makers of our society create perceptions that may
or may not resemble reality. In a sense, a perception takes on its own reality, and when that perception is false or distorts the truth, the perceived and the perceiver are ill served. Colleges and universities suffer when their problems are not adequately balanced by their achievements in the public mind, a difficulty fed by institutional rivalries as much as by inadequate reporting. When the truth is known, thoughtful people will understand the high value of their colleges and universities.

At the same time they will insist that academia beware its self-serving tendencies and demonstrate intellectual and professional service to its constituency.

3) In its legitimate desire for tax reduction and reform, the public, in its own long range interest, should seek laws and measures that encourage the best quality in its existing colleges and universities. It is apparent that the citizens of Michigan want tax
reform, especially property tax reform. Anger over tax problems that accompany inflation, frustration with the single business tax, you name it, people are aroused. They are aroused to such a degree that the Tisch Proposal nearly passed, and some form of it may in the future. Some of you, I know were advocates, others not.

In my view, the passage of such an act would dismantle higher education in Michigan, both public and private, as we know it. To some the frustration or their belief that we could reassemble what we want after the debacle convinces them of their position. I believe we need a less drastic approach. That is why I support Proposal A. It provides homeowners property tax relief and cuts the tax burden by at least a quarter of a billion dollars. Of course it shifts taxes to a degree. It certainly isn’t businesses favorite alternative. It will not help higher education, but it will not devastate it either. It gives us some reform and a chance to see
where we come out with important institutions and organizations of
the state without undermining their existence.

The recent reforms in workmen's and unemployment compensation
laws may not suit everyone, but they are moves in the opposite
direction we were going -- not drastic, but direction setting. I
believe this is better public policy. Just as I believe Proposal A
is better policy than Tisch.

In Washington a funding program that may keep 750,000 students
away from technical schools and colleges throughout the country
appears too severe. Cuts in the budget can and will be made. No
one should have a free ride, but deserving people should have oppor-
tunity. How many of those 750,000 are people who need retraining
or upgrading of skills to become more productive in our economy?

There are some counter proposals to the original budget recommenda-
tions that call for reductions, but again not quite so large in
financial aid to students. The total budget is close to President Reagan's figures, but the priorities are changed slightly.

4) Public colleges will have to look for more private support just as private colleges seek and receive substantial support from state and federal tax dollars. Michigan tax support to students at private colleges amounts to more money than the state provides for the operations of Grand Valley, Saginaw Valley, Lake Superior, and the University of Michigan at Flint combined. Without that and federal aid, most private colleges could not survive. It has kept worthy private institutions alive and strong.

With the exception of the University of Michigan, the large public institutions in the state have only recently looked to private sources for financial support. Grand Valley, the local and relatively new state college, from the beginning has depended upon local gifts and grants, to start the college, to build a public
television station, a stadium, and an endowment. Comparison of endowments illustrates past dependency on state funds for support. The University of Michigan has pursued an effective campaign for many years and has an endowment of 114 million dollars. Michigan State ranks a distant second with a little under 15 million dollars, Wayne State third with about 10 million. In fourth place is Grand Valley with $3,112,000. I believe I am correct when I say there is no other endowment fund in a senior public institution over 2 million dollars.

The American people want good education and the majority want a free enterprise system with a limitation on the amount they pay in taxes. Since both public and private colleges depend on tax dollars in a free enterprise system, both in the future will depend more equally on private gift support. The growth of endowment and capital funds from private sources in state institutions is critical.
In conclusion I want to comment about Grand Rapids, a truly All American community. I can speak for many of us in higher education when I say we are proud of our community. We like working here. In the future we believe more people will need our services to retrain or upgrade their skills. The historic agreement between Grand Rapids Junior College and Grand Valley that calls for cooperation between the two institutions, that defines the responsibilities and restrictions on each, illustrates that we are trying to provide needed, well-planned courses of instruction to the people of our area. We have a good balance of private and public education here. Even in difficult times higher education in Grand Rapids is developing, trying to anticipate the greatest areas of need and service. All of you through business, industry, commerce, the professions, and charities are contributing to the dynamic life of this community, countering the trend in so many cities. The colleges want to do
their part. We know we are needed and that we need you. We want you to know what we do well and encourage us in it. This is a great place to live and we can be grateful to God that we live here.