Reflections on a Grand Valley Career

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Reflections on a Grand Valley Career

I will have completed 35 years with the University when I retire in March. When I was asked to reflect on my experiences I jumped at the chance.

When I arrived at GVSC in 1966 we had 1,000 students and the occupied campus consisted of the three Great Lakes buildings and Seidman House. The science faculty was in the process of moving into Loutit Hall. The recreation facilities were located in an old farmhouse and our fledgling athletic teams were practicing and playing games at local high schools. Our first residence hall, Copeland House, and the Central Utilities Building were under construction. The state legislature was very concerned that GVSC enrollment was significantly less than expert projections. The administration and the faculty were hard at work on the self-study process that would lead to the first North Central Association accreditation. We had about 90 total faculty and staff. I had been appointed as the first personnel director and was hired to establish the personnel office (now known as Human Resources). About six months after my arrival I had met and knew by name all of the faculty and staff.

Enough reminiscing. What I really want to address is some of my thoughts about what we have done together so far. I’ve chosen three areas to comment on.

Facilities

I have always believed that the beauty of our campuses sets the tone for learning and working at Grand Valley. So many students and parents have told me that the first impression appearance of the Allendale campus and the buildings was a major factor in selecting Grand Valley. (We all know, though, that it is really the people they meet here who, in their influence in their decision to attend Grand Valley."

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Ron VanSteeland is Vice President for Finance and Administration
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meet here who, in the end, make the most difference in their decision to apply.) The late John Hannah, President of Michigan State University from 1941 to 1969, was always my hero in campus planning and beautification because he was so persistent in his goal of developing a pretty Big 10 campus. In A Memoir he said, “One of the university’s greatest assets is the beautiful park in which the campus is located.” I have always said that you could tell which part of that large East Lansing campus was developed after President Hannah was no longer in charge.

The Grand River and deep wooded ravines provided an excellent backdrop for developing the Allendale campus. Our buildings each make unique architectural statements and, I think, we have avoided the institutional look that so many regional campuses have. The Cook Carillon pro-
vides a campus focal point, has become one of our "postcard" buildings and is a wonderful musical instrument. The Cook-DeWitt Center is a facility that few campuses our age enjoy. Our science laboratories, performing arts facilities, computer labs and most classrooms are "state of the art." Art and Design faculty tell me that their facilities are among the best in the entire midwest. Athletics and recreational facilities are superior among universities our size and those we compete against. Colleagues from other universities visit our campus to study and copy our new student housing.

While some people complain about the distance from the parking lots to the buildings, we have been able to protect an attractive pedestrian campus environment that we all enjoy. With building placement we have been able to provide some gateway glimpses into the center of campus. Whenever possible we have screened otherwise-ugly parking lots from view. We have developed small gardens, including the Shakespeare and Japanese Gardens, an Arboretum and a pedestrian mall in the south campus. We have designated protected areas such as the Blendon's Landing archeological site, a protected Meadowland and a protected Wood Lot and we have a superb Nature Trail along the Grand River. The Meadows Golf Club is a model for developing and maintaining an environmentally friendly golf course. The cumulative impact of these facilities and amenities has, I think, the desired positive effect on the best and the brightest of those whom we are trying to attract to study and teach here.

The Pew Campus in Grand Rapids has just become a campus after being simply Eberhard Center for several years. Building a campus with both railroad tracks and a major expressway running through it is one of the most difficult campus planning challenges we have ever faced. In addition to meeting our academic goals, we wanted to build an urban campus that was appropriately compact, architecturally unique, pedestrian friendly, welcoming, safe, functional in Michigan winters and supportive of the DeVos Center for Arts and tumble Engineering Laboratory. Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia is described as "an academic community that will follow us all our eventual impact of the development on both the development of the City of Grand Rapids."

The building on the land was developed in cooperation with the City of Grand Rapids. Nonetheless, I think we have been successful and is a good start on a more complex and difficult project.

There is, of course,

The Grand Valley Wo...
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The Grand Valley Work Ethic

Nearly everyone knows that state funding has not kept up with our enrollment growth. We are dead last (15th out of 15 public universities) in state funding per student. Not only that - we are 15th by a country mile. If we had only received

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In addition to meeting our academic goals, we wanted to build an urban campus that was appropriately compact, architecturally unique, pedestrian friendly, welcoming, safe, functional in Michigan winters and supportive of a sense of community. I think we have accomplished this with the addition of the DeVos Center, Secchia Hall and the Keller Engineering Laboratories buildings. Like Thomas Jefferson's famous campus at the University of Virginia, this campus might be described as "an academic village."

the per-student funding of the 14th place school ahead of us last year we would have an additional $3.8 million per year to support our programs. In fact, if we had been funded at the minimum funding floor level established by the legislature ($4,500 per student) for our actual enrollment last year we would have over $9 million more each year to spend. This circumstance may not be fair but we have had to live with it and its consequences.

What this has meant is that, compared to other universities, we have learned to operate very efficiently. I am often asked how we manage to do this and, yet, to have such a good (and growing) institutional reputation. There are several factors that, I think, pertain:

1. We are fortunate to be in a major metropolitan area that has many people who have excellent credentials who are willing and able to teach part-time for the University.

2. We have an administrative team that is dedicated to finding more efficient and effective ways to get our work done without adding new staff and additional resources. We borrow and steal ideas from our colleagues at other universities so that we don’t have to “reinvent the wheel.” Our administrators don’t automatically request additional budgetary support for every program-

matic improvement every year.

3. I encourage my staff and parts on other campuses. An experience I had last year, a visit that I made to the University of Michigan, reconfirms that other staff, space and other programs there.

4. We use our eminent and responsible programs have a significant we are in University department that help us to hold support costs and career preparation.

5. I think there might be a Michigan work ethic that we talk about. People know about it and talk about it. Those of us who seem to pick up on staff members almost a quicker pace here than in other universities are also very effective.

6. We at GVSU are at doing more with less. Our faculty and staff, our relatively poor excuse for not doing more, imply another challenge. Being dead last in performance, dead last in performance, be among the best in the State of Michigan work.

The State of Michigan recently made the first seen in an official university has carried out academic responsibilities better staff than any of the
I have an additional support our programs funded at the for our actual have over $9 mil­ to live with it we manage to are several In my own experience I have always learned things from such a visit that I can apply here at GVSU. The downside of these visits is that we almost always reconfirm that other universities have much more staff, space and other resources to manage the same programs than we do here at GVSU.

4. We use our own students in very significant and responsible jobs. Lots of our professional programs have a significant internship presence in University departments. This is invaluable in helping us to hold down our administrative and support costs and it also provides meaningful career preparation experiences for the students.

5. I think there must be something to the West Michigan work ethic we sometimes hear people talk about. People who are raised here seem to know about it and to at least vaguely understand it. Those of us who move here from elsewhere seem to pick up on it. Our new administrative staff members almost always notice that there is a quicker pace here and that performance expectations are also very high.

6. We at GVSU are among the very best I know at doing more with less. We can be proud of that. Our faculty and staff don't simply complain about our relatively poor state funding and use it an excuse for not doing our best. Rather, it is simply another challenge we have to overcome. Being dead last in funding doesn't justify being dead last in performance. Personally, I'd rather be among the best at what we do.

The State of Michigan Auditor General recently made the first acknowledgment I have ever seen in an official university audit that GVSU is the most efficient public university in Michigan. Their 2000 Audit Report for Grand Valley State University included this statement; “The University has carried out its administrative and academic responsibilities with more students per staff than any of the state's other public univer-
Parents always comment to us about how friendly Grand Valley is. Usually they are comparing Grand Valley to other colleges or to the high school where their child attended. We should feel good about this compliment and strive to keep it that way.

Humane and Friendly Environment

One of the things I have noticed about Grand Valley is that so many people either smile or speak to me when I meet them on the sidewalk. Even if they don’t acknowledge me I usually smile or speak to them in the hopes that they will speak first to another person later on. There aren’t many environments in our culture today where people speak to or acknowledge total strangers.

Our Student Assistance Centers in the Allendale Student Services Building, the Meijer Campus in Holland and DeVos Center on the Pew Campus are unique in higher education today so far as I know. Many people probably think they are traditional university cashiers. They couldn’t be more wrong. These staff members have been cross-trained and are representatives of the registrar’s office, student accounts, financial aid, cashier’s office, etc. At GVSU we have combined functions that are traditionally separate into a “one-stop-shopping” Center where students can transact all of their business with the university. Each of the offices involved had to concede traditional organization-chart thinking in order to create a combined service for students. The units involved in this venture should be applauded for their innovative work.

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In 1979 (during the turmoil of state budget cuts for universities) our faculty and professional staff supported the idea of taking very modest salary increases because Valley colleagues were forced seemingly unnecessarily. One of the years Valley appropriation increases were so badly cut—1982-83—one of the years that we could be sure to support the colleagues on other campuses.

In Harmony

As I wrote this essay I recalled from my experiences years I sang popular songs. We performed songs by the Four Lads, the Four Seasons, and the Brothers Four as well. We worked to polish our singing so the tone—a high note that was actually not being sung perfectly, the overtone—that is not heard by the listener the impression that was made was a fuller, more vibrant sound. Regardless of whether the overtone or not, it was important that everyone in the quartet gave voice to the notes that a group of people working together can have—the sum of the parts is greater than the sum of the parts. That has been the idea at the success of the friends of people are performing and working and collaborating—the whole has become greater than the parts. I think it is this idea of people who are not a part of the whole.

Those things I have just a few of the things I have said more, much more, to others who will also be
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Salary increases because some of our Grand Valley colleagues were being laid off at the time. In 1982-83—one of the years when the state economy forced seemingly unending cuts in the Grand Valley appropriation—our faculty and professional staff group agreed to postpone their salary increases until the very end of the fiscal year so that we could be sure that there were funds available to support the raises. At the time my colleagues on other campuses could hardly believe this act of altruism by our faculty and staff.

In Harmony

As I wrote this essay I was reminded of a parallel from my experience with music. For several years I sang popular music with a men’s quartet. We performed songs from the repertoire of the Four Lads, the Four Freshman, the Four Preps, the Brothers Four and barbershop. We always worked to polish our “sound,” to make it smoother and to give it energy and vitality. You might not know that, when certain chords are sung perfectly, the four voices create an overtone—a high note that we can hear but which is actually not being sung by anyone. It gives the listener the impression that there are five voices—a fuller, more vibrant sound that seems to “ring.” Regardless of whether our audience could hear the overtone or not, it always gave the four of us in the quartet goose bumps. This is the impact that a group of people doing something very well together can have—the whole can become greater than the sum of the parts. That is a way of looking at the success of Grand Valley. Because lots of people are performing their jobs so well and are working and collaborating together as a team, the whole has become more than the sum of the parts. I think it is this greater whole which is so remarkable and which is so easily noticed by those who are not a part of our community.

Those things I have written about above are just a few of the things about my experience with GVSU with which I am most proud. I could have said more, much more. I’ll leave some of that to others who will also be leaving soon. When I retire I plan to spend more time traveling and enjoying my family and to do some consulting and volunteer work. Grand Valley will always be part of my life and both Peggy and I plan to stay in close touch with the many friends we have here.