Economic Club Farewell Address, delivered at the Amway Grand Plaza on April 30, 2001

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The distinguished members of this club had an opportunity a few weeks ago to hear my successor, Mark Murray, a person in whom I am well pleased. Now I address you. It is unusual for a successor to precede the retiring incumbent, a bit like putting the cart before the horse. You have had the cart – now you get the horse.

My secretary, Teri Losey, passed on to me Loma Schultz’s invitation to speak before you today. I told Teri that deep in my heart I knew that no one wanted to hear what a “lame duck” university president had to say and to call Lorna and tell her that. After their exchange it was explained to me that deep in Lorna’s heart she wanted me to speak – so here I am.

Peter Secchia, our illustrious chair, commented to me that he supposed a farewell address was appropriate, and so it is. Three famous ones that come to mind are those delivered by U.S. Presidents George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower and General of the Army, Douglas MacArthur. One should remain humble when he flings his final words of analysis and advice at an audience. I am reminded to do so by a line actually printed in a church bulletin. “The pastor will give his farewell message after which the choir will sing, Break Forth Into Joy.”

I must be forthright with you. I will not be gone entirely. When a university has an employee who, with boldness and without shame, asks people for money, the trustees want to squeeze out of him the last benefit the boldness can bring. As I cast about for a way to continue fundraising for the university and protect my leisure, I was directed
again to an honest-to-goodness church fundraising announcement, “The assistant minister unveiled the new tithing campaign slogan last Sunday,” “I upped my pledge. Up yours.”

So you may see me here or you may see me in Florida. Please be generous.

My romance with west Michigan began on an August day in 1945.

My father, who was a graduate of Hope College, accepted the Presidency of his alma mater, and our family traveled from Iowa through Wisconsin, where grandparents lived, and crossed the lake from Manitowoc to Ludington. We drove south on U.S. 31 to Holland on a beautiful summer morning. I was no longer a boy, but an excited 14-year old adolescent looking forward to new friends and new adventures in a new place. I tell you this because from the time I set foot on Michigan soil, the impressions and experiences began to accumulate and, through them, send roots deep into west Michigan. The ensuing loyalty to place and people influenced my return in 1969 after 16 years wandering through other fields.

In those high school and college years I became aware of who made things happen. Grand Rapids was the big city. The Wealthy Street Theatre lured us with an array of foreign films. The Schnitzelbank and Hollys were the restaurants we frequented before theatre or after shopping. Hattems with Maxine at the electric organ was the place for after theatre steak sandwiches.

The American Seating Company was the area’s greatest economic engine at that time. Through many changes it is back in the hands of those we know and care about. There was Crampton Mfg. Co., no longer with us, and Clare Jarecki was running his tool and die operation, providing experience for many who became successful manufacturers on their own.
Steelcase was moving, but not yet the leader it has become. Bob Pew had just come back from the service. B. J. DePree came from Middleville to Zeeland and Herman Miller was in its early stages. Jerry Haworth was the industrial art teacher in Holland Junior High School. Shaw Walker was the largest office furniture manufacturer, located in Muskegon.

On the political scene the Lieutenant Governor, the Speaker of the House and the majority leader of the State Senate all came from Ottawa County at one time or another during my maturing years. No one asked them for much since we are a self-reliant people. Yet in Grand Rapids, Frank McKay pulled political strings to accomplish what he wanted on the local and state level, and I was around to watch the beginning of the reform movement led by Paul Goebel Sr. with Dorothy Judd and others to supplant his power. In higher education we didn’t ask much and we didn’t receive much. That’s how it was when I left for graduate school.

When I returned, the world of west Michigan had changed. The office furniture industry was on track for greater sales and greater profits. Amway and Meijer were new names. I came back because Bill Seidman had stimulated a new kind of political activity. He asked the politicians to bring state-supported, four-year higher education here and it worked. Grand Valley State College was up and running, and after five years, needed its second President. Since then my colleagues and I have worked to define its mission and build its usefulness for the students who attended. From the beginning I saw that there was an educational void in this region because the state had not provided resources here that other areas of the state had abundantly received. And, if they were not forthcoming, the economic, social, and health care development would be at a disadvantage. Like a
growing furniture industry, like the success of Amway, Meijer and other companies, the development of Grand Valley was necessary for west Michigan to reach its full potential as a place to live and work. Though a state university’s mission has many facets, the importance of Grand Valley to west Michigan is my farewell topic to you.

The word indigenous is defined as something produced, growing or living naturally in a particular region or environment. If something is indigenous to where we live, it is always with us, and how we use it or adjust to it may well effect the way we live.

There are three reasons that explain the importance, even the necessity, for a region and a city to have an indigenous university – a university bringing tax and private dollars together for education and research to contribute to the economic, social, and political health of that region and city. They are the reasons of necessity.

The first is to supply talented people for jobs that exist and are constantly being created when a place is on the move. Of course, graduates come from many colleges and universities into an economic zone. Outside institutions may bring their resources into the zone and assist in educating, but they tend to ebb and flow over the decades not supplying a large core of programs and rapid adjustments to local needs that a home base university provides. Sustaining presence is a concept that should not be dismissed.

Let’s examine Grand Valley’s contribution as Grand Rapids’ indigenous university. First there are 85 academic and career paths offered to students right here where we live and work. Second, this fall there will be 19,000 students enrolled in those programs. Third, about 57% of those students will be from our core region. Others come from every county in Michigan, forty-three states, and 44 foreign countries. Fourth,
when our students graduate, over 75% prefer to stay in west Michigan and find jobs here. Grand Valley not only assists in keeping our own, it is an importer of talent to the core area. Nearly 30,000 of our graduates are here, and think of what that number will be as the university grows if future graduates follow the path of our alumni. Think, too, of the people who use the programs to enhance their professional lives, not necessarily looking for a degree.

But this is not a numbers game alone. Quality counts. We want our jobs filled with talented people. At Grand Valley we have set our objective to be excellent at teaching. We believe good teaching leads to better-stimulated, better-prepared graduates. There are ways to measure our success and failure as we strive to maintain a high quality of teaching. I believe the best is to observe who and how many people want to enroll at our university. We have not been a rapidly growing university because people didn’t have choices. Grand Rapids is a burned over district when it comes to universities and colleges with a home base elsewhere seeking to increase enrollments and influence by coming here. I think the major reason for our growth is good programs, well taught.

It is a mixed blessing when a people’s university like Grand Valley cannot accept all the freshman undergraduates who want to matriculate and who really deserve an opportunity for higher education at an institution where teaching is stressed. In the most recent UCLA study of admissions policies and profiles, a study periodically conducted, Grand Valley, along with The University of Michigan and Michigan Tech, were the only three of Michigan’s fifteen public campuses that were rated highly selective in admitting freshmen. Though this may be unfortunate for those who seek admission and fail, it means that the high percentage of our graduates who stay here will provide a highly
talented pool. You who are on the search for capable people are, and will be, beneficiaries of the quality your indigenous university provides.

Another recent sign that our striving for quality may be on the right track came from a US News and World Report survey of graduate schools in the country. Of the 239 Masters Programs in Public Administration, ours was ranked 15th, along with The University of Michigan and University of Utah. Only two of us in Michigan were in the top 25.

These comments I share with you because the numbers and the talent would not be available to this region on nearly the same scale without your own state university. There is a shortage of nurses and engineers. There looms a shortfall in the number of teachers. The shortage would be more severe without your own state university, and as Grand Valley becomes what it ultimately can become, its programs and numbers of students should always take into account the region’s needs. If it does, shortages of talented people for jobs will be alleviated and possibly eliminated. The quality and availability of people to fill jobs and even create them determines the economic and social quality of life in a region. An indigenous university tuned to the demand for good people will make a difference.

The second reason of necessity can be found in the variety, the number, and the design of programs, seminars, conferences, consultancies and data collection and analysis originating at a local university that assumes a responsibility for its region. I checked with our Seidman School of Business, the Padnos School of Engineering, the School of Social Work, the Van Andel Global Trade Center and our office of Conferences Services for their activities during the past month. Those five university centers initiated,
organized and/or managed 127 events for corporations, agencies, or groups outside the university. This occurs month after month with a slight dip in July and August.

What does this mean and why is it so important? Businesses change, markets change, opportunities change, life changes. We have some control over whether or not the changes benefit us. All these university-spawned activities are responses to actual and predicted changes in the places where the economy and social conditions of our region are determined. They may be dealing with local issues, but they can reach as far as matters of global trade that touch our lives. Ellen Glasgow wrote, “All change is not growth, as all movement is not forward.”

A university was located in your midst to make sure that all its resources would assist in your coping with change and make sure the changes make us grow and move forward. The university must not lose sight of that responsibility, and the public the university serves must be aware of it. Without your own university, only a fraction of the people now assisted would find a comfortable, accessible, comprehensive home where they can find help. Recently the United States Department of Commerce moved its Michigan office to assist small business development to Grand Valley and our Seidman School of Business. Last year, with the Chamber of Commerce, we established our Family Business Center in the Seidman School. These two recent developments arm the indigenous university for more sophisticated service to the areas of entrepreneurs and businesses. Thomas Bacon wrote, “He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils.” Grand Valley is a pharmacy filled with remedies for west Michigan’s conditions that may require them.
Reason of necessity number three is research. For us I think it is primarily applied research and technology transfer. Last week The Grand Rapids Press carried a story on the front page about a report by a Democratic Party think tank in Washington, D.C. The report evaluated fifty urban areas in the United States as to their ability to attract and sustain what they defined as the new economy. Grand Rapids was 50th. Among the lacking elements in Grand Rapids was a university. After completing the DeVos Center, my balloon was fairly well inflated, but the Belt-Line boys deflated it. A university to them is Harvard, MIT, or Berkley. Michigan might qualify, and Michigan State maybe. I read these assessment reports with interest. We are bombarded by the 10 best this or the 10 worst that. Whenever Grand Rapids makes it into one of them, I always find what I believe to be an error in fact or judgment, and an erroneous conclusion. I am not sure what the new economy is – neither is the NASDAQ – but our old one has done quite well by us.

Having shared with you my antagonism towards all the self-styled experts who make a living telling those in the provinces how expert they are, I will admit to some agreement. Over a decade ago the Battell organization from Columbus, Ohio, was commissioned to do an economic study of Grand Rapids. They, too, pointed to the lack of research and technology transfer. A consortium of universities and corporations including Grand Valley, tried, unsuccessfully in the long run, to develop that capacity. Since then, the Van Andel Institute launched Grand Rapids into the world of basic research, and the life sciences corridor, much touted, involves the basic research universities in Michigan and the Van Andel Institute in a consortium. I think the project is of great value to Michigan. Yet, the synergy that comes between and among local
industries and organizations and the research and technology transfer of a university requires the indigenous university. It cannot be pervasive without it. The major corporations have the wealth and can turn to national consultants. Most smaller businesses will not be as well served as they should be unless there is a local university with a research capacity. Grand Valley has some of that capacity, and I am sure some of my colleagues bristle when the Washington swells ignore it. I am encouraged by the SmartZone initiative which will bring the State, municipalities, private business, and universities together for economic development. Grand Rapids and Muskegon both received SmartZone designations, and Grand Valley will be a major player in applied research and technology transfer. We will be instrumental in helping basic researchers turn their discoveries into marketable properties. With a new building at Michigan and Lafayette near the hospitals and close to the Van Andel Institute, a location in the SmartZone, Grand Valley is poised to become a research player in a new economy or old economy game or both.

As an indigenous university, we are far along in meeting the objectives implied by the first two reasons of necessity and we are building a foundation for more research, the third reason of necessity. Today it is the west Michigan-Grand Rapids contribution made by Grand Valley that is so important to get right, to understand, and to support.

When Paul Johnson, then Chairman of JSJ Company in Grand Haven and Chairman of GVSU's Board of Control, accompanied me on fundraising calls, he would always inquire about the college loyalty of the one on whom we were calling. If an alum of another college, he would ask that we be viewed as Avis Rent-A-Car Co. At the
time they advertised that they were number two (behind Hertz) but "they tried harder." If we were given number two in the person's mind, we had the commitment.

Asking for such commitment in a town where the maize and blue flies above the stars and stripes on autumn Saturdays, where Coach Izzo is mentioned as a Presidential candidate and the great contribution of the local institutions of higher education is made manifest in their alumni, faculty and staff is another expression of boldness. But it is not a diminishment of any of them, and in fact, we get along well; it is the recognition that we must utilize all the resources of the state we can attract to build our own golden city.

My watchful eye looks always to the elected representatives. In my thirty-two years they have always been helpful, and seek to be more helpful than ever now. A flawed term limitation law is an obvious obstruction to what we want to achieve, but we must overcome. The days when a Lieutenant Governor, a Speaker of the House and a majority leader did not have to produce are over.

In every region there are issues that divide. I hope the sense of right that all people carry with them has within it the charity that allows cooperation on big issues such as improving infrastructure, feeding the arts, reforming education where needed, sensible protection of the environment, equal rights for citizens, encouragement of industry and commerce, and building of a people's comprehensive university.

For generations west Michigan's economy has been propelled by family created and developed businesses. Most of my argument today is in support of assisting them and helping to create them. In this day of the "buy out" it is more important than ever for the economy and the social and benevolent attitudes of the region that we recreate our strengths through entrepreneurs. As we observe with great interest how out-of-town
owners express their involvement in our lives, we see as we have in the banking industry that the local entrepreneurial spirit is alive. Bank West remains a local institution. Grand Bank, which gives to the community 10 percent of its pre-tax earnings, was one of the first of the more recently formed banks which include among them, Mercantile, Macatawa, Founders, and Paragon. Other industries have their examples.

Local business and industry in west Michigan has always assumed the responsibility for keeping schools, colleges, hospitals, social agencies, the arts, and religion alive and healthy. In a changing world all of us who love this place have to find ways to keep this commitment constant. Keeping business and industry healthy is the place to begin. Keeping the state university here healthy and focused is one of the necessary elements in that process.

My vision and passion for this place and for the university has not changed in 32 years, except the vision may have sharpened and become crystal clear. I doubt that either will dim or lessen in coming years, but I will no longer have the levers to effect any outcome. I will still have the dream, and when I dream the optimism of late 19th Century hymns best express my idealized state of mind. Last September those feelings came over me as a worship service closed singing this verse of the hymn “Hail the Glorious Golden City.”

“Hail the Glorious Golden City and the work that we have builded, oft with bleeding hands and tears, oft in error, oft in anguish, will not perish with our years; it will live and shine transfigured in the final reign of right: it will pass into the splendors of the City of Light.”
Here is the ideal state of being for Grand Rapids, for west Michigan, and for Grand Valley. I will carry it with me as I now take my leave. When General Douglas MacArthur addressed the Congress of the United States in his farewell address he quoted from military lore “Old Soldiers never die, they just fade away.” That holds true for veterans of my profession as well. “Old university presidents never die, they just fade away.”