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Faculty and Staff Highlights: Arnie Smithalexander Director of Upward Bound

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Arnie Smithalexander Director of Upward Bound



Photography By Amanda Pitts

Colleagues: What brought you to Grand Valley State University and why did you stay?

Smithalexander: I came to Grand Valley from Kalamazoo Valley Community College where I was the coordinator of the program for Disability Services. I had just earned a degree in psychology and was taking classes in counseling and personnel when I heard about the opportunity and the posting for a director and a counselor in a program

known as Upward Bound. I grew up in Grand Rapids and attended Central High School and Grand Rapids Junior College, so I was eager to get back home.

In 1978, Grand Valley hired me as a counselor for the TRiO Upward Bound program to help first-generation and low-income students prepare for getting into and graduating from college. Coming to Grand Valley was



coming home to a dream job. In 1986, I became director of both Upward Bound and Talent Search.

Colleagues: What have been some of the most important accomplishments you have achieved during your time at Grand Valley?

Smithalexander: When there were very few African-American students on campus, I became their advisor and taught the students the power of working together as a group. We organized and sponsored the first MLK program at Grand Valley and in the city of Grand Rapids.

Also, meeting with first-generation eighth-grade students whose parents have no high school education and few resources, finances, or information about the process of preparing and paying for their children's college education. Because of what I do, hundreds of my students are able to realize their dream of a college degree and go on to become doctors, lawyers, professors, policemen, counselors and teachers.

I have also written and secured grants up to \$1.5 million a year, for more than 20 years to support programs for first-generation, low-income students.

Colleagues: What people, programs and partnerships have enriched students and the university?

Smithalexander: I wrote and designed the first Mathematics and Science Program on campus to focus on improving the math and science skills of high school students; a \$1.2 million grant, and I wrote the first McNair Scholars Program on campus to prepare first-generation and low-income students to enter into a doctoral program; a \$1.1 million grant. I maintain the Upward Bound program by raising the profiles for the TRiO programs.

I have been able to develop some key partnerships that have benefitted the students and the university. They include Grand Rapids Public Schools, Baldwin Public Schools, East Kentwood Public Schools and Godwin Public Schools. I had the honor of being elected to the

Grand Rapids Board of Education for two terms, where work was done in the areas of curriculum and early college program for high school students.

I have also served on state, regional and national boards of my professional organizations, including serving as president of the State Board of Michigan.

Colleagues: What are your hopes and dreams for the future of the College of Education?

Smithalexander: In the College of Education, we realize the need for more students from the urban schools to consider teaching and acknowledge that more effort must be made to not only identify those students, but also provide the support they require to get into and out of the College of Education.

We understand this extra support is required because many of our students from urban schools are coming in at a disadvantage because they received an inferior education (for whatever reason). They are competing with students who come from more affluent communities and schools that offer a better education. Both are expected to finish at the same time and be equally prepared to teach. For those students who are coming from some urban schools, the College of Education must provide services to support them so they can catch up in certain areas.

The urban schools student populations are progressively becoming black, brown and poor, while the teaching populations are more white and upper-middle-class. In the future, as Grand Valley, I hope all colleges of education develop strategies to address this crisis from both perspectives. It means encouraging more students from urban and rural communities to consider teaching by providing the necessary support to help them become successful. We must also develop professional standards and a threshold that all seasoned and new teachers must meet to continually teach.

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Claudia Sowa Wojciakowski Professor Emerita

Colleagues: What brought you to Grand Valley State University and why did you stay?

Wojciakowski: Before coming to Grand Valley, I was an associate professor and program director for the Counseling Education Program at the University of Virginia. I came to Grand Valley in 2000 because of the opportunity to develop the master's program for school counselors.

I stayed because I was fortunate enough to be able to interact with people who let me create and develop programs; they were very encouraging and supportive. I was given the opportunity to go from creating the master's in school counseling to creating the College of Education's Community Outreach Office, which is now the Center for Educational Partnerships. I wanted to stay because

Grand Valley allowed me to take best practices and current research and use it to create offices and programs.

Colleagues: What have been some of the most important accomplishments you have achieved during your time at Grand Valley?

Wojciakowski: It really makes me happy to see how well students are doing in the master's in school counseling program. I am also proud of the Center for Educational Partnerships and the outstanding team of people who work in that office. For a small office, they accomplish a tremendous amount. One of the things I am most pleased about is the teamwork associated with that office. They are the link between the College of Education and the community. The team works to create partnerships that range

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Awards and Certificates

- Southeastern Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personnel (SAEOpp) Distinguished Consultant Award
- Michigan Chapter of MAEOPP for Distinctive Leadership, Vision, Commitment, and Loyalty and President Award
- National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations-Advocate Award
- Grand Rapids Community College Award for establishing the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Memorial Walk
- The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, West Michigan Chapter Award Grand Rapids Public School Board Women's History Month honoring the Legacy of African American Women Elected Officials Award
- Grand Valley State University Outstanding Black Student Union (BSU) Advisor Award-three years in a row
- BSU-Most Successful Fundraising-Certificate of Achievement
- Student Foundation-Most Innovative Program
- Administrative/Professional Service to Community Award