

8-25-2006

Opening Remarks, delivered at Convocation on August 25, 2006

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OPENING CONVOCATION

August 25, 2006

Arend D. Lubbers

The program this morning reminds me of the pageants produced each year in the small Iowa town where I lived as a child. They were elaborate presentations written by the most literate of the citizens celebrating an event or depicting the history of the community. I remember one where there were three central characters representing past, present, and future, much like this morning's event. By observing the color of my hair, you can determine which part is mine. As this morning's representative of the past, let me tell you about what concerned us in the early days of our University. The foundation had to be strong because its strength and dimensions would determine the kind of

University that could be built up on it. The cornerstone was never in doubt. It was undergraduate education.

There were two reasons for placing that academic stone first. The founders and the first faculty members believed that undergraduate education comprised of a strong liberal arts core provided the best way to become an educated person, and that commitment to the liberal arts differentiated Grand Valley from the state teacher colleges turned universities. We looked more like a private liberal arts college. After some interesting and often volatile experiments in developing a cluster of colleges, the University has been more traditionally structured. We always sought highly qualified faculty whose priority was teaching undergraduates. Many of you here are becoming Grand Valley students for the first time. You are an

academically select group, and I am sure, in making your choice, excellent academic programs were important. The high academic achievement here can be traced back in part to the quality and choices of the early faculty and administrators.

The second reason rests in the awareness that most major state universities place research above undergraduate education, using mostly graduate student assistants to teach a large portion of the undergraduate curriculum. From the beginning Grand Valley avoided that approach indicating an institutional understanding that the State of Michigan needed a college committed especially to undergraduates, even when it was ready to design graduate programs and encourage research. There are still a few faculty around who were here when all this was happening.

The second foundation stone was student life, representing some characteristics and attitudes that we early timers wanted to permeate our college. We wanted to eliminate that unfriendly condition defined by the terms “red tape,” or “run around.”

To defeat the conditions is a never-ending battle. The weapons against it are good systems and friendly people operating those systems, who see themselves as students’ helpers. I think the University’s success in winning more battles than it has lost in this arena may be an unspoken enhancer of Grand Valley’s reputation. We have been first in the state and even the nation in implementing systems in financial aid, admissions, registration, and more; staffed by experienced people who know what they are doing.

Early on we decided to have the best student residences in the state. I think that objective was achieved

and I observe since leaving continues as a priority. A sensitive student services staff that always includes student participation in the planning makes this happen. I pose the question to new students and parents: Did the living accommodations awaiting you influence your choice?

If you tour or use our wellness facilities, if you attend our theatre, music or dance performances, if you participate in intramural sports or follow the success of our athletic teams, you will understand how important successful life apart from the classroom was to the concept of University building to those who started it all.

Foundation stone number three is living environment. From the construction of the first building, any observer could see that superior design and campus beauty were high on the University building agenda. My colleagues and I tried to keep faith with those who launched the adventure

in good architecture and landscaping. Along the way we added the concept – every building an art gallery and the outdoors a sculpture garden – an objective worthy of a great place. People live happier and more productive lives in attractive surroundings, and universities must be willing to pay the little more that it costs.

The fourth foundation stone is community service and research. Our University was established only because the west Michigan community wanted it and supported it with money and political action. We have always had a special relationship with the community. Growing out of that relationship came our graduate program and our professional programs. We were in a large population area unserved by steady, consistent offerings in fields it needed for job enhancement and for industrial, commercial and social progress.

Our early research efforts were applied to local problems, and since have expanded. We began to support faculty who pursued scholarly research, and particularly those who could include students in their projects. We wanted also to enable those whose scholarly passion motivated them towards research. From my view, this has been done quite well without detracting from the commitment to good teaching.

Institutional loyalty is the fifth and final foundation stone. Great institutions are distinguished from other institutions by the loyalty of their faculties and staff. I watched as the lives of the people who stayed here became interwoven with the life of the University. Of course, that was not true of all, but it was of many; enough to make this place a recipient of institutional love. The commitment that flowed from that attachment actually allowed us to become

a better academic institution, and, I believe, distinguishes Grand Valley.

This happened because the dignity of all employed was respected and the dignity of their jobs as well. There is no unimportant work to be done at Grand Valley.

Today we welcome a new President. We believe the Search Committee and the Board have done uncommonly well in selecting him. We present him with the results and characteristics that have evolved over forty-six years. We love our University and hope, Mr. President, you will come to love it too, that your life will become interwoven with it like so many of ours.

This place for some time has lived in an era of good feeling, and that we hope will continue as academic sophistication and growth accompany your efforts and those engaged with you in the enterprise. May our state's

motto be our motto to, “Si queres amoenam peninsula,
circumspice.” “If you seek a brighter place, look about
you.”