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## Administrative Memoir, delivered on July 30, 2014

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Administrative Memoir

Arend D. Lubbers

July 30, ~~2014~~

2014

My father explained to me that satisfied students and a beautiful well-maintained campus influenced prospective students most when they were selecting a college. When I was twelve years old he began showing me plans <sup>FOR</sup> of proposed buildings. When they were being constructed he invited me to “walk-throughs.” He even introduced me to architects. I observed him insisting on well-trimmed grass, clean buildings, and colorful flower beds. He was making sure that the campus over which he presided was the most beautiful his vision~~s~~ and budget could make it. The competition for freshman students was intense and he wanted the spaces enclosed and open to attract them and their parents. During his 29 years as a college president we spent hours together planning, analyzing and enjoying the making of a campus.

How students act and how they perform depends in part on the quality of the space they occupy. As the years passed I observed the truth of that observation passed on to me by my father.

When I became president of Central College in 1960, it had a superior faculty gathered together by my predecessor, Gerrit VanderJagt, teaching the smallest number of students in an Iowa accredited college. The objective was obvious; more students. After making some

personnel changes and working with new recruiters we were having some success. It was time to make beautification part of our strategy.

The City of Pella granted our request to close Peace Street; a street that ran through the center of campus. I then made an appointment to see a highly recommended Des Moines architect, Bill Hurd. We needed a plan. Bill Hurd's proposal went beyond what we had imagined. He placed a lake where the street had been with an island and also a bridge joining what the street had divided. My reaction was instantaneous. "Let's do it." And we did. Early in my career I observed what a positive effect changing and beautifying a campus can have on those who use it. Today that lake is still the single most important landscape feature identifying ~~the attractiveness of~~ the campus.

Accomplishing the task had repercussions. As the heavy equipment moved in my family and I left for two weeks of vacationing and development work. After a few days the Business Manager who was directing the project called me to say people of the town were upset by the mess. He said some of the influential townsmen thought we should reconsider. Fill up the hole and start over was the consensus. I was thankful I was not there. I did not see an ugly hole. I remembered an elevation and blueprint of a beautiful lake. I told him "keep on digging."

The lake set Central apart from competing liberal arts colleges. Admission counselors enjoyed strolling along its banks with potential students and their parents. The college's students took pride in the way the campus looked, and Central's enrollment increased each year thereafter by a double digit percentage until I left and no longer kept track.

### Selecting an Architect

On a flight to San Francisco soon after I became a college president I was fortunate to be seated next to a frequent contributor to the leading architectural journals. As I shared with him my need to build satisfying structures at the lowest cost he responded that there are architects whose design requires ten dollar bricks, and there are those who will specify three dollar bricks for clients on tight budgets. I was determined to find the best three dollar architects.

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The first building of my career was a dormitory for men made necessary by student recruitment success. Questions about the beauty and function were foremost in my mind. I was my father's son.

An architect from De Moines, a Central graduate, was selected, so was an interior designer. I had a hunch that the architect might design a beautiful structure, but the interior

designer was better qualified to furnish it in a way that best enhanced the life of those who used it. The objectives were four fold, first to build a dormitory attractive outside and inside, and therefore helpful in the recruitment of students. The second and third were to provide an apartment for the dormitory director, and spacious rooms for the college guests. The final objective was to place it where it could fit best in the campus plan. I was pleased with the result. My engagement with the architect, the interior designer and the contractor gave me satisfaction, and convinced me that one of a president's important functions is to be so engaged.

During my forty-one year career as a college and university president, thirty-seven buildings to house students were built. Many staff and hundreds of students participated in planning, and through that process evolved student residences that people from many colleges and universities came to see. The president's role was to insist that students' preferences be one of the determining design factors, that student life in the future be anticipated, and that a superior architect provide an excellent design.

A usual way to select an architect is to select several of them to be interviewed, and choose the one who makes the best presentation. Sometimes this works well. Sometimes it doesn't. Before asking architects to participate, some on the institution's staff who have the president's confidence should become familiar with their work. Then find out who does their

engineering and evaluate it. Discuss with them how they determine cost for the project and for their fees. If there is no in-house capacity to project cost, ask a trusted contractor to make an estimate that can be compared to the architect's.

When I was involved in my first building projects at Grand Valley the Building and Grounds Manager recommended an architect. Seeking more information I mentioned his name to L. William Seidman, our Board Chair. He reacted immediately and vehemently. "That man has diminished one state university. I will never approve him for work at Grand Valley."

When I saw the campus I understood immediately. No president should be uninformed about matters architectural. After all, the president is ultimately responsible for work during his or her tenure. It is a legacy that carries lasting judgment.

Just short of a decade after its completion the roof of the Fieldhouse at Grand Valley was declared unsafe. Leaks in the wooden arch supported dome began to appear in 1977. An expert on domes from Columbia University came to evaluate. One day before the beginning of the fall term in 1978 he sent me a telegram explaining that the dome could collapse, and we should close the building.

Then a long "song and dance began." Grand Valley sued the architect, the contractor, and the dome manufacturer. The architect claimed the dome could be repaired. The dome

company had failed as had the dome they supplied us. The debate seemed endless, while Grand Valley students had no place for indoor recreation and varsity athletics. When it appeared the architect might seek an injunction to prohibit us from dismantling the dome, I told Vice President Ron VanSteeland to bring in a wrecking ball before the injunction was filed. He did, and after two strikes the dome unraveled in 10 seconds.

Though legal wrangles continued we could now make plans for a new Fieldhouse, saving what we could from the old. It was 1979 and the State of Michigan was in recession. No funds were being appropriated for university construction projects. Fortunately, with the help of our lobbyist, the Chairman of the Capital Outlay Committee of the <sup>LEGISLATURE</sup> ~~Legislative~~ Representative Rusty Helman from Dollar Bay in the <sup>Upper</sup> ~~Northern~~ Peninsula, understood our plight, and decided to help us. Over two visits to Dollar Bay, and snowmobiling through beautiful pine forests, we cemented our relationship. In 1980 Rusty crafted a 65 million dollar capital outlay bill for universities. Our Fieldhouse cost was 14 million dollars, and the foremost reason he put together the bill. In the process he suggested we use a specific architect because it might facilitate passage of the bill in the Senate. Politics of that kind were new to me, but there was no violation of the law. I was desperate. The architect's design and excellent service more than met my expectations. In 1982 we could once more play games in a beautiful fieldhouse.

There are several ways to select an architect and that was a unique, one time only, way for me. I was comfortable with it, and with the result. After arbitration, we received only \$60,000 damages, but we had a new Fieldhouse.

When I assumed the presidency of Grand Valley the sheriff of Ottawa County had just closed the student newspaper padlocking the doors and arresting the student editor for the use of obscene words in its publications. The Board sued the sheriff for shutting down the paper, claiming the County could fine the paper and arrest the editor, but not restrict the right to publish. This controversy brought me into immediate contact with local legislators who were asked by the media for comment about the situation. As they unloaded their thoughts and feelings about their local state university, among their complaints was Grand Valley's failure to use local architects since the founding in 1960.

The Board, influenced by Vice President Phil Buchen, who later became President Gerald Ford's legal counsel, had selected nationally regarded architects and landscape architects from the eastern part of Michigan who planned and built a distinguished campus for a fledgling college. The architectural beginning excited me, yet my inclination favored the legislative critics. We needed local support if we were to develop a university of 20,000 students from a college of 1,800 in 1969. ~~One of the state colleges at the time had used a Grand Rapids~~



~~architect to design all of its new buildings. Bill Seidman, Chairman of our Board, and founder of Grand Valley told us never to use his services. When I saw the campus I understood immediately.~~ We then sought out local architects whose design ability we trusted, and with one exception we used them during my administration. We were seldom dissatisfied with their work.

According to my count over fifty major building and landscaping projects were completed between 1969 and 2001 at Grand Valley allowing us to become well-acquainted with architectural firms, their designers and engineers. Design was our first priority; engineering was expected to be good. In time the best designers emerged, and eventually in the later years of my career one gave us the greatest satisfaction. He and his colleagues received our bid to design the most important structures.

Our building and grounds headquarters had a room called the skunkworks; a place set aside for creative planning and decision making. Our number one designer's firm set up its skunkworks. In one or another of those rooms, staff from the university and the architectural firm planned, designed, analyzed, and hammered out decisions. I joined these sessions when crucial decisions were to be made or certified. As you know by now, I believe the president is

the final approver of matters architectural. Campus aesthetics and functions are literally set in ; concrete when space is enclosed.

I never knew how the two ~~inter~~ inter ~~of~~ <sup>the</sup> creative work received ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> name, but they furthered the process of making the campus an aesthetic statement. Every president should take architectural work seriously. It's the president's legacy whether he or she knows it or not.

### Campus Maintenance

Presidential habits become symbols. Often they come inadvertently though they can be calculated. One of my habits was to pick up paper and other refuse littering the campus. When I meet retired maintenance people at a restaurant or store they remind me of my habit. The awareness of this proclivity reached beyond those responsible for maintaining the campus. It became my mantra. Though it took several years to achieve a level of maintenance satisfactory to me, I believe the thousands of pounds of trash I deposited in waste containers advanced my objective of creating the kind of campus environment I wanted. I sought a place that contributed to positive feelings for those who inhabited it and served as a magnet for those who were considering inhabiting it.

There were two obstacles that had to be overcome before the ideal state materialized. The first was an attitude among many building and grounds staff that they were unappreciated.

The second was a union brought about by lack of appreciation and mismanagement that protected the lazy and the incompetent. By the time I arrived at Grand Valley most poor managers had been replaced but the carryover of negativity remained. Years of good management slowly brought about change in attitude and union practice. I contributed to the change by becoming acquainted with many of the groundsmen, janitors, and mechanics. I knew names and met people in their places of work. On public occasions I called attention to the necessity of what they did to make our university successful; how all of us depended on them to do what only they could do. What the president does and says, even in the maintenance department carries inordinate weight on the outcome.

The president has a responsibility to call managers' attention to faulty maintenance work. On one of my frequent walks through campus buildings I noticed three dead flies in a prominent window well. They were still there when I returned in a week. Three weeks later they remained and I called the Director of Buildings and Grounds. He told me about the problem he had with the janitor of the building. The three dead flies were not cause for dismissal, but they may have been the "back breaking straw" that brought it about. His replacement did so much better.