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My remarks cannot be described as history. I have not gathered objective evidence to support what I am going to say. I share with you perceptions, memories, and analyses.

There are three characteristics about the establishment of Grand Valley that have contributed to its nature and ethos. In combination they created a unique institution. First, the Grand Rapids area was the most populous area in Michigan without indigenous state supported education. The community college was controlled by the local school system, and other state universities were here with programs fluctuating according to their current budgets and interests. The area had good private, church related colleges closely tied to their ethnic and religious origins and also good proprietary education. Bill Seidman analyzed the situation and decided the people of West Michigan deserved the opportunities in higher education their taxes could provide, and the benefits that come with having their own institution. His idea prevailed and Grand Valley State College was founded. It came late for the population center where it was located. It is analogous to an unexpected child born to 45 year old parents after the
others kids have reached adulthood. What conditions did this time of birth provide the newcomer in the family of Michigan higher education?

1. It allowed for a curriculum plan significantly different from the plans that launched other Michigan state institutions at an earlier time.

2. It was born into an unusual educational vacuum offering it opportunities for initiating programs unavailable to the population previously.

3. It had an opportunity to find more efficient ways and less costly ways to run a college and later a university; making it able to direct resources to top priorities more easily than it was for established institutions.

These were not only conditions but, advantages and not fully understood or recognized at the outset. Just as the infant does not comprehend what will happen in life, so the new college did not know how profoundly these conditions would affect its future. No matter what initial goals were defined, (and some were achieved), the Grand Valley process toward self fulfillment and self recognition owes more to the inductive process than the deductive.

Bill Seidman attended Dartmouth and he was aware of Hope’s and Calvin’s success at preparing students for graduate education. The natural outcome for Bill and his associates was to offer high quality state-
sponsored liberal arts education. Through stops and starts, twists and turns, their objective has been reached, and they have succeeded to a remarkable degree if not according to the original blueprint.

The foundation in the liberal arts affects the definition of quality of an undergraduate education, and as professional and undergraduates programs develop it is more likely to leave the commitment to undergraduate education undiminished. That is what happened at Grand Valley and is not likely to have happened had a four year institution evolved from the local junior college or began as a state normal college; most of whom came to see themselves in the image of the first and leading university. The intense commitment to the liberal arts is the second distinguishing characteristic.

For Bill Seidman and his committee to succeed in establishing a new liberal arts college in West Michigan they needed political support. For that the people of West Michigan were mobilized. That the University of Michigan and Michigan State were organizing branches at the time in the east, in Dearborn, Flint, and Oakland County, may have contributed momentum to the movement to bring state supported higher education to the west. Grand Rapids even then was considered a prize as demonstrated by the programs state universities bestowed upon it. With
the citizens interest for something more indigenous both behemoths of higher education were ready to respond. Mostly each did not want the other to have a branch, and therefore agreed reluctantly to allow an independent college. That standoff and the involvement of the West Michigan community in raising a million dollars required by the legislature for its approval of the project allowed Seidman to move forward.

I doubt if any other university had the extent of community involvement in its founding. The dynamic relationship between community and college contributed to the nature and ethos of the college. Grand Valley was fortunate to be in maturation when economic entrepreneurs created great wealth in West Michigan. Many helped us with buildings and programs. Likewise, the coffers of the State were often full and our appropriations reflected it.

In West Michigan the university lives within the community nourishing it with engineering, health professions, business education, social workers, teacher training, and more and takes nourishment from it. Cooperation not confrontation is the norm. There is no ivory tower. This joining of community and college is the third characteristic present at the founding.

I am not sure to what degree the three existing characteristics at the founding influenced the events and happenings that shaped Grand Valley
during my administration, yet I think they are important. I turn now to those happenings and events.

Early in my tenure a group who held the license for a Public television station came to me because they could not secure the money for it and asked if Grand Valley would like to hold the license. I have never said, “Yes”, faster. Then I told Jerry Ford that his district had the largest population without public television in the U.S. We needed $500,000 from the Federal government, $500,000 in private support, and $300,000 a year from the legislature for operations. Within three months Representative Ford did his part; we raised private money from local sources, and the legislature put the $300,000 in the appropriations bill. Grand Valley brought public television to the region, and ever since has reaped the benefits that public broadcasting focus on its purveyor.

The initial Seidman dream plan was to have units or schools of 1,500 students. It did not work out that way, but separate colleges were established. The 1960's and early 1970's were times of experimentation with structure and curriculum throughout the United States, and we were cutting edge. In the end, this did not work for us. We created more intense competition among colleges within Grand Valley than we did with outside competitors. Some curricular and process experimentation and unwise
faculty appointments eroded from within, and created bad impressions in the community on whom we depended. The scarcity of resources in an economic recession opened the way for ending the experiment after a decade of trying. Did the experiment have a redeeming aspect? I believe it did. At a time many bright students were “turned off” by traditional college education and they found a place in one of our experimental colleges. Until the 1960’s and 1970’s revolution was over more graduates from Thomas Jefferson College enrolled in post-graduate education than from our largest more traditional college. Older adults were looking for a way to begin or resume their quest for a college degree. William James College made special accommodation for them. They came and appreciated it.

The years 1978 – 1982 were formative. They brought an end to the experiment, the restructuring of the university, and the return to growth in the enrollment. The forces that converged at that time might be referred to as a perfect storm. In 1978 the day before fall term began, we received word that the fieldhouse dome was unsafe. We closed the fieldhouse immediately, and were without our own recreational facilities until 1982. A severe economic recession hit Michigan. Our appropriations were slashed to the point of financial exigency. Colleges had to be closed, faculty
released, others merged into the new structure. You can imagine the forces unleashed. One was a move by some faculty to vote no confidence in the President. Glenn Niemeyer, Ron VanSteeland, and Rod Mulder, Chair of the Faculty, all of whom, I believe, could have supported the move and survive it, did not. The trustees also supported me so I remained in office. Instead of a 10 year term the way was opened for a 32 ½ year presidency.

In response to inquiries and requests from public educators in our region, a task force was appointed to design a graduate program in education. When the task force work was complete they brought it to the Faculty Senate for approval. There is no surprise when a faculty committed to the liberals arts and undergraduate education rejects a graduate curriculum in the field of education. As president I did not interfere in curriculum matters within departments and divisions. I did feel compelled to have my say in proposing and considering new programs. I asked the Board to accept and approve the task force report rejecting the Senate’s position. They did knowing my resignation would be in their hands if they didn’t. Thus graduate education came to Grand Valley. The precedent was set. Those faculty who didn’t agree thought me
untrustworthy when espousing the liberal arts. For me it was not an either or, but both.

Resistance to professional programs came with each attempt to start them; Nursing from the State Board of Education staff, Law from the Governor’s office, graduate degree in Business from other universities, Engineering from the Michigan President’s Council. There were no more serious battles within as faculty leaders committed to the liberal arts core saw their beliefs respected and protected and also saw how people seeking professional education in the region were served. Law was our only failure. We tried twice. While we and two other universities were being torpedoed, we quietly initiated graduate education in business. The opponents were confronted with a “fait accompli”; what has become Seidman College was on its way.

In a meeting of the President’s Council our insistence on launching an engineering school was debated. For me it was a Kafkaesque experience as I listened to Grand Valley and me being pummeled. Finally, the President of Michigan State, said to me, “Don, are you going to start an engineering school no matter how we vote?” I said, “Yes”, and he responded, “Let’s stop this discussion and move on.” That did not satisfy
all who wanted to do something. I suggested that they send a letter to the Grand Valley Board censuring our move. I believe that is what they did.

The decision to make Grand Valley a multi-campus university was pivotal. The Michigan Senate Appropriations Committee declared no funding for universities off their campuses so our Board claimed Kent, Ottawa, and Muskegon counties as our campus. In the 1970’s our administrative team began planning for a Grand Rapids Campus. The traumas of 1979 to 1982 kept that plan in the can. Once we had a new fieldhouse we opened the can. Community leaders and trustees not only supported but guided us. Jim Sebastian and Rich DeVos helped us settle on a location. Those two, along with Bob Pew, demonstrated again how leaders in the community shared the vision. Similar commitments in Muskegon and by leaders in Grand Haven and Holland have validated the long distant claim of a three county campus.

I conclude with an analysis of two factors during my time in our university’s development that I believe contributed to what Grand Valley is. One is personal and the other very personal, so I cannot claim the objectivity I would like in making them. I had a long Presidency, but not so long as Glenn Niemeyer and Ron VanSteeland served the university. We probably were together as Provost, Vice President and CFO, and President
longer than any other such team in higher education. Art Hills as my assistant was a valuable member in our earlier years together, and Jean Enright joined us and made herself indispensable for the final years. She used to explain to participants or visitors to our meeting that they might not follow everything because we could anticipate one another and spoke in short-hand. I have to believe that such a long, cordial, but by no means sweet, administrative and personal relationship, gave stability to the institution.

Finally, my long tenure had to be a stabilizing factor for a new university, but there is more. I asked Nancy to join me to make the Presidency of Grand Valley work. From past observation and experience, I knew a team approach works best. She agreed to give up her career and join mine. As a team neither of us thought of Grand Valley as a stepping stone. We did not look for another position and when we were sought, we were not persuaded. In time we could not see ourselves apart from Grand Valley. We were intertwined. Such emotional involvement is often criticized and thought to be unwise. Whatever the verdict, the fact of it adds a shade of color to the university that is not there if the commitment is not.
Wherever you worked in this vineyard called Grand Valley, you have memories of events that shaped it, issues that were important to you. These are the ones important to me. I know they don’t tell the whole story, but they tell a story.