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“When a man covers a vast field many errors may be forgiven him if the result adds to our comprehension of life,” wrote Will Durant in *The Life of Greece*. We who deal with learning and research today understand, I think, the imperfections of our process and also the necessity of our pursuit for the successes it must produce. For forty-one years in my profession I observed failures and successes, failed and succeeded myself. It was not a simple observation. What appeared obvious often proved not to be. The meaning of actions taken required time to become fully understood. I found myself taking comfort in ambiguity while also enjoying making policy that was unequivocal. Those who invited me to address you have unleashed upon you a torrent of opinion and reminiscence that is likely only from a retired President whose lens looking to the past is becoming increasingly misty.

When I was a young president at Central College one of the self-appointed leaders of the Faculty, an economics professor of substantial abilities, visited me often explaining that “they” (meaning me) were not supportive. Early one fall term two recently appointed members of the Faculty asked for an appointment. Their complaint included the actions of the Economics professor and other senior faculty members whom the two of them labeled “they” claiming they were stifling the interests of the younger faculty. Not long after my discussion with them the economics professor had reason to make an appointment. As he launched into his “we and they” game I interrupted him and said, “Don, (for we shared the same name), you are not considered a “we” by all, whom you presume to represent. There are some in your ranks who consider you a “they.” I was surprised how flustered he became though not enough to keep him from regaining his composure and pressing on.

Seldom have I had the opportunity to address a group of all “theys” without a single “we” for whom I must craft my remarks. There cannot be a single we amongst the thousands of college presidents. The culture of higher education does not permit it. We “theys” are not intended to be included beyond some academic borders. All we can do is acknowledge our condition and ascertain how to use it to our advantage. I spent considerable time trying to define
myself as a soft not a hard “they.” That is not to imply I surrendered what I considered appropriate presidential authority. It was more a matter of temperament.

I address you tonight from a pleasant pasture prepared for me by those for whom I worked. As I contemplate the characteristics of presidents who survive, an essential one is good relations with the Board members, or at least a solid majority of them. Over the years I watched the presidents of the three universities whose regents are elected, and nominees for those positions dependent on the governor’s power of appointment. Some presidents have earned my highest admiration for the skill they demonstrated in what appeared to be the successful “herding of cats.” Others for lack of judgment or an ego that allowed no recognition of subordination of any kind paid the price. A few fled the conditions for less tumultuous arenas.

Those of us who reported to governor appointed trustees had opportunities on occasion to influence those appointments. When we did not there could be consequences. Jim Blanchard was the first Democrat elected Governor in sixteen years. He had a backlog of aspiring appointees. One of my presidential colleagues was having a difficult time negotiating with faculty and other unions. The governor had just appointed to his Board two union connected people. It was as if two handsome foxes had been given access to a well-stocked chicken coop. I asked him, “didn’t you talk to the governor?” His reply, “Board appointments are the governor’s business.” His view hastened his demise.

When I retired from the presidency after forty-one years, thirty-two at Grand Valley, reporters from the media asked me, “What was your greatest accomplishment?” I replied, “Survival.”; remembering what Governor G. Mennen Williams said to one supporter who urged him to be a great governor by taking a bold action with considerable political risk. He said, “You have to be governor before you can be a great governor.” I think that is good advice for university presidents and chancellors as they pursue their objectives. When they do not heed it, they may not be presidents for long. Most presidents sometime during their tenure will have a trustee or trustees who are potential or real trouble makers. I had few of them at Grand Valley. They were always people the governor had reasons to appoint, and we had no influence. Our strategy was to assign staff to them, keep in close contact and inundate them with information. Nancy and I made sure they were included on invitation lists. One often reciprocated and we became friends. He, however, is the only trustee I talked sternly to at a Board meeting, a risky tack, but I had the support of the seven other Board members.
One of our trustees decided to run for the Board of Regents at one of the research universities. He won and was re-elected to a second term. One day I received a phone call from a frustrated president asking how we had handled him. I understood what he was enduring. Whether or not our strategy was helpful to him, I don’t know.

The search process for finding a president is flawed because it does not have a high enough percentage of good results. From my observation there is only one search firm that hits more home runs than pop outs, yet firms can be useful in securing candidates. Though the Presidential selection process does not always produce the desired result, the success of affirmative action has greatly enriched the pool of candidates providing a much higher chance of avoiding a mistake. Our state universities have been beneficiaries on several occasions.

When a highly regarded professor at Grand Valley complained to me that there were too few women in our administration, she raised my consciousness. Though no positions were open at the time I assisted her in securing a Provost position. She is now a Chancellor at a University of Minnesota campus.

Affirmative action has changed presidential selection for the better. Where then is the weakness in the process? The weakness occurs when Boards are too passive in the appointment process. They appoint a selection committee comprised of representatives from the university’s constituents. Aspirants send in resumes, people are recommended and asked to apply. In our state universities all is supposed to be transparent. A few candidates are interviewed and one, two, or three usually recommended to the Board. The Board makes its choice. Sometimes this works well, sometimes not so well.

To improve the success rate a Board should appoint a proven head hunter one or two years before a president retires, or as soon as a president announces her or his resignation. One who is responsible directly to the trustees. The assignment – search within and outside the university, find and consider those suited for the position. The Board should know the candidates that are acceptable to them before they receive a committee recommendation. Boards in general need to be more active early in the process. The ones that do, as some in our state have done, fair best. But why should you be concerned? You already have been selected.

There is a kind of presidency that only a few take on consciously, but some discover after they are in office. The college or university where they preside is in a financial or cultural mess. One Eastern university asked a 75 year old revered faculty member to come back and restore
sanity to a faculty where leadership thought all presidents deserved professional annihilation. In our state the president of an excellent college, whose career there for years was exemplary, in his last years did not correct a difficult financial condition he had allowed to develop. His successor was in immediate trouble with the Faculty as necessary reductions were made. The job was done, the college looks much healthier, the unpopular president’s work was soon finished, and a new one will be welcomed into a much better professional climate. If any of you find yourself in a similar situation do what must be done, and if you survive you are lucky or a genius. One protective step that can be taken before accepting a university presidency is to ascertain if it’s worth accepting.

In the late 1980’s the governor and the legislature required all universities to make drastic cuts in mid-year, large enough for several to declare financial exigency. The ones who cut one time fared much better than those who did it piecemeal, bringing forth negative anguished cries over a period of weeks. Those who spread the responsibility for designating the reductions had less battered presidents than those whose president stood forth publically to announce them. In at least one of our universities the president was permanently damaged and soon eased out, and I believe others failed to recover to function effectively. Presidents, I have learned, must lead firmly and decisively at times of financial difficulties. How they lead makes all the difference.

Another potential pitfall is the president’s residence. One of our Michigan presidents did not survive a huge expenditure on his residence. One I know in another state authorized $2,000,000 spent on the official house, and was forced out within months. I have often wondered if the trustees set him up. In my case, I asked the Board annually to be aware of the budget proposed for the house. Even then I was attacked from time to time. Once I remember, for purchasing a tablecloth and another time for having five fireplaces which were built into the house before I was born. Two years before I retired we moved out for six months so the necessary changes could be made for an incoming president and his family. What could they do to me then? My thought on the subject was always, “Be aware, take care.”

By temperament, I think, there are two kinds of university presidents. The first I will call “the Professional.” He or she is challenged by the work, is accustomed to success, plans to do a good job. and move on to the next challenge. This is a good formula for success if self-interest is managed well. The second I call “the Committed.” The Committed must identify with the institution. They must invest emotionally in it if they are to work effectively and be fulfilled.
This, too, is a formula for success if the president does not let commitment become more important than competency and vision. The Committed are likely to serve longer. That can be good or bad depending on the situation. The Board must be alert and make the right call.

After a tumultuous period at one of our universities I had an opportunity in a visit with the Board Chair to suggest that his university consider choosing a president who loved the institution. To me it seemed the place needed some tender loving care. It needed one of its own.

When a university is too comfortable, somewhat stodgy, just not keeping up, failing to compete successfully, a transformational president is required. Both the Professional type and one who is not looking for a stepping stone may have the skills. If the Professional president respects tradition and is not harsh in handling relationships, the personal detachment may be helpful in making the tough decisions.

The Committed president is likely to become more affected by the personal consequences of the decisions that she or he makes, yet is not necessarily deterred from making them. I have watched both kinds succeed and fail so the type is not determinant. Making the right decisions at the right time, selecting the right people for administrative positions, and generating a positive spirit will lead the Professional and the Committed to success. From my perspective a university needs at times in its history presidents who invest emotionally in them. Only the cynical are unmoved when the leader cares. For institutions comprised of people just like individuals respond to leaders whom they trust and who demonstrate personal appreciation for what they are contributing.

You are presidenting in Michigan, a different experience from serving in Wisconsin, California, New York and most other states. Is the difference worth it? To me, it was. Our universities have constitutional autonomy. I believe the strength and influence of the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, when Harlan Hatcher and John Hannah’s power was at its zenith, were not about to be placed in a state higher education system. What a fortuitous juxtaposition that was for the rest of us. The constitution of 1963 guaranteed our independence. When the State Board of Education attempted to exercise its influence over university curricula, the Supreme Court defined their place in higher education for them. Stay out.

On occasion, our enemies, and that is the correct designation, tried to take that independence away. This was not a gentlemen or ladies game. The two who secured independence in the first place were strong enough to preserve the research institution’s
Some at the major campuses were not opposed to the others being joined together in a system. They thought, I suppose, such separation might enhance their funding. Wisdom prevailed and we are much better hanging together. Two such attempts were made during my tenure.

Three experiences will illustrate my support of independent universities defined and protected by the constitution. Sometime in the mid-1970’s, due in part to my naivete and in part to the lack of influence of our legislative delegation from West Michigan, our institution was not faring as we believed it should. One of my associates suggested I visit with former Senate Majority Leader Emil Lockwood and his partner Jerry Coomes, who had established a new multi-client lobbying firm. I was convinced we needed their services. They took us on, the first in Michigan, and their firm with its founders’ successors continues to represent Grand Valley. This move shattered precedent, and could never have happened without constitutional autonomy. When I next attended a President’s Council meeting, one of my colleagues at one of the research universities ripped into me claiming higher education institutions do not hire outside lobbyists. Within two years his university joined the ranks of the state universities who did.

The request for our institution to include engineering in our curriculum came from various manufacturers in the Grand Rapids region. Money to establish it from local sources was easy and swift. When the new program came before the Provost’s group for approval, the vote was 4 to 4 with others absent or abstaining. By that time we were well on the way towards having engineering in place. At the next President’s Council meeting, the Chair of the Provost’s Council reported that we were not in compliance. What to do? I sat there while my colleagues debated what action to take. I felt I was a character in a Kafka novel. Finally, Cecil Mackey asked me, “Don. Are you going to do it no matter what we do?” I replied, “Yes,” and suggested that the Council send a letter to the Grand Valley Board expressing its displeasure. That was done and the matter settled. The College of Engineering is burgeoning with students, serving the local region, and of no threat to other engineering colleges and schools. Constitutional autonomy was the key.

West Michigan was the largest area in the nation un-served by Public Broadcasting. When a group who held the licensee for a public television station offered it to me I felt like a child offered candy. To achieve the goal we needed $300,000 for operations which the legislature promised, $500,000 from the local community which was raised in three months, and
$500,000 from the Federal Government. I met with Jerry Ford, then Minority Leader and our Representative, asking him to secure $500,000 from Federal sources. This he did in three months. In the course of our conversation I was probably too bold when I asked, “Why don’t you bring more money home to your district?” He replied, “No one asks me.” I asked him. Only in a Michigan state college or university could such a project come to fruition in the way it did.

I share these experiences to illustrate what I believe about being a president in Michigan. We have opportunities for initiatives those in other states do not have. Our universities are greater for it. Each is unique and there are fewer threats than in most states to make us a system of “cookie cutter” institutions. To have the autonomy to manage our own tuition policy is perhaps the most significant.

The University of Wisconsin and the University of Michigan appeared on the scene as the first two significant state universities challenging in a sense the exclusive status of the Ivy League institutions. Today Madison is the major campus in a State-wide university dealing with bureaucracies and the restraints they bring. Michigan is unencumbered. The Wisconsin system is logical, rational, and easier for politicians to effect. Our non-system has its own logic, freeing us from administrative and political burdens that detract from our focusing on making our universities better. Though I view from afar, I think I notice a difference between Madison and Ann Arbor. Comparing the two in the late 19th Century Wisconsin claimed an edge. Now the University of Michigan, independent as we all are, can claim that edge.

Mark Twain said, “Cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with an education.” His humor often had a demeaning quality, but he points out that education makes a difference. We can make a difference through teaching and research. In some instances a world of difference. Presidents have to facilitate that. I have a way out unproven theory. If all the thoughts of all the people employed by the university each day are at least 65% positive, there is a good chance that objectives can be reached. A positive ethos, along with excellent faculty, is a formula for success. I often had this weird thought, “Are we going to make the 65% today?” Only one admonition; be sure you do not identify with Pollyanna. Strength and discernment are part of the game.