Reflections on Three Decades of Deaning

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Reflections on Three Decades of Deaning

This is my last opportunity to have a captured audience of colleagues. From now on my only captured listeners will be students. But this being my 28th year as a dean at Grand Valley State University, preceded by a couple of years as dean at my previous institution, gives me this opportunity to reflect on 30 years in this role.

There is an old story about the jobs at a university. If it's the job of the president to make public statements, the job of the faculty to think, then it is the dean's job to keep the faculty from speaking in public and to keep the president from thinking.

Most of you know I got into this business of academic administration early in my academic career. In fact, my full-time faculty career lasted only one term. My first position after graduate school was as a founding faculty member of a new state university in Springfield, Illinois. The academic vice-president who had hired the first round of faculty members was fired in the summer before classes were to begin. Part of his problem was failing to submit the appropriate curriculum materials to the various boards so the university would have the authority to offer degrees. By December, the acting vice-president had also failed to complete the task, and we had 800 students enrolled in programs not authorized to give degrees.

At that point the chairman of the Illinois Board of Higher Education told the president that if the required documentation was not submitted by March 1, the new university would become a branch of one of the existing universities. This got the president's attention. For some reason he called me into his office just before the Christmas break and asked me to take a leave from my teaching responsibilities to become Academic Planning Coordinator and head up the task. For some reason, I agreed and there went my Christmas break. But by March 1, the five-volume document had been prepared and the new university was saved.

Six years later I was appointed Dean of Science and Mathematics, and 7 years as Dean of Grand Valley's Kirkhof College. Following the end of his administrative career and a sabbatical leave next year, he will take up his faculty role teaching courses in mathematics, philosophy and science/religion at Grand Valley State University. This piece was delivered as an address to the Science and Mathematics faculty in January of 2004.
Six years later, and in the meanwhile having been appointed Dean of Educational Services while also teaching each semester, I received tenure. The same year I received the offer to come to what was then Grand Valley State Colleges as dean of the newest unit called College IV, which later became Kirkhof College following the university's first million-dollar gift.

Why should someone go into academic administration? A recent address given by Sally Frost Mason, Provost at Purdue University, put it this way:

If you like helping others, if you enjoy new challenges every day;

if you aren't afraid to make decisions;

if you truly enjoy helping your faculty and students achieve special honors and recognition . . . ;

if you are basically an optimistic person;

if you enjoy uncertainty and can deal with the fact that often an outcome to a situation would not be the one you would choose;

if you ‒ enjoy sharing a strong vision of the institution . . . with the public, your trustees, your alums, and your state legislators;

if you can deal patiently with an endless array of agendas (often not your own) . . . ;

if you don't mind repeating yourself over and over and over again;

if you like being around smart people;

if you like building teams;

if you enjoy stretching your intellect and your energy;

and if you enjoy . . . working with limited resources but with unlimited vision, knowing that what you do, can and will have enormous positive impact on thousands of young and not-so-young lives;
	hen you will love administration, at any level.

In this list, I realized that these conditions fit me well and help explain my satisfaction with all these years of dean ing. Sure there have been frustrating times when one wonders if all of the work is worth it. But I can honestly say there has not been a single year that I haven't looked back with satisfaction and appreciation for the opportunity to have held this office and this responsibility.

So now after three decades of dean ing, my 21st year as Dean of Science and Mathematics, what reflections can I offer? Let me propose a dozen or so.

1. "The perfect is the enemy of the good."

This quote attributed to Voltaire can be applied to life in the university. As faculty we look for the perfect. We are trained to analyze, think critically, challenge previously held ideas, and be confident of our conclusions before publishing. The mathematician looks for the proof without errors, or even the more elegant proof. The scientist seeks to correct, improve, revise or confirm the previously held truths. The health professional seeks the appropriate treatment without error. The engineering professor teaches the student to build in redundancy and safety margins to prevent the failure of the system or the collapse of a bridge. We are in the business of seeking perfection, yet we also live in an institution that does not achieve that goal. The good for us is accepting and celebrating the fact that it is
this less than perfect institution that allows us to pursue the academic goal of perfecting our own areas of knowledge to pass on to future generations. The task of university administration is to help build this imperfect institution made up of imperfect individuals who continue to seek the elusive goal of perfection in our knowledge.

2. Worry!
I am aware that while discussing the planned reorganization at last Fall's Faculty meeting we were admonished, "Don't Worry." Now while "worry" can be a negative concept, there are times when it is precisely the right thing to do. The Oxford English Dictionary defines worry as:

1. feel or cause to feel troubled over actual or potential difficulties. 6. (worry out) discover or devise (a solution) by persistent thought.

In particular, I am pleased that so many of you "worried" about the "actual or potential difficulties" with the reorganization proposals. Especially in this academic setting, we should openly discuss and, yes, debate such issues. Only in such an environment can we make good decisions. We should also "worry out"—that is discover or devise a solution by persistent thought—the curriculum, our students' learning, our own scholarship and intellectual growth. Yes, in this university environment we cannot be complacent or driven out the good will enable us to pursue the academic goal of perfecting our own areas of knowledge to pass on to future generations. The task of university administration is to help build this imperfect institution made up of imperfect individuals who continue to seek the elusive goal of perfection in our knowledge.

I have long believed we are most happy and most satisfied when we are busy. Working hard as individuals, as well as in departments and the whole division, is not only the way to productivity, but it is also the way to satisfaction and happiness. When someone comments to me how busy they are, my oft response is, "Yes, isn't it great." I truly believe that keeping busy, having meaningful things to do, is an important component in happiness. I once read that some of the highest burn-out rate is among counselors and elementary school teachers. On the face of it you would think that these professions aren't really that hard. As a counselor you sit and listen to people and their problems. If you are good you don't say much in return, but let the client do most of the talking. As a grade-school teacher you have the same curriculum to teach each year, usually to the same grade level. Again, it seems like it is not that demanding. But in both fields it is all too easy to get bored. Listening to the same psychological problem for the five hundredth time or when teaching long division for the thirtieth time can be boring. Now that is certainly not inevitable. One can approach even those jobs with a "maximal think" attitude. I have a good friend who taught junior-high math for over thirty years with no signs of burn-out. He told me every year is different; every year is a challenge, not because the subject is different, but every year he has a new group of students. It is the challenge of the students that keeps him alive, not the repetition of the subject matter. As we approach our various jobs, let's not fall into "minimal think" of how little can we get by with, but how much can we accomplish: "maximal think."

4. Pacing.
While accomplishing as much as we can, we also have to keep in mind that we cannot do it all at once. Workaholics are not usually the most productive. Accomplishing a lot involves pacing. A marathon runner cannot maintain a sprint pace. To have energy for the whole semester, the whole year, yes, even for one's whole career, requires pacing. In his best selling book, Seven Habits of Highly Successful People, Stephen Covey makes the distinction between the 2-by-2 grid with the axis and urgent. Things which are not urgent but are important mark things which are not urgent. Things which are urgent but not important mark things which are urgent. To have the same curriculum to teach each year, usually to the same grade level. The face of it you would think that these professions aren't really that hard. As a counselor you sit and listen to people and their problems. If you are good you don't say much in return, but let the client do most of the talking. As a grade-school teacher you have the same curriculum to teach each year, usually to the same grade level. Again, it seems like it is not that demanding. But in both fields it is all too easy to get bored. Listening to the same psychological problem for the five hundredth time or when teaching long division for the thirtieth time can be boring. Now that is certainly not inevitable. One can approach even those jobs with a "maximal think" attitude. I have a good friend who taught junior-high math for over thirty years with no signs of burn-out. He told me every year is different; every year is a challenge, not because the subject is different, but every year he has a new group of students. It is the challenge of the students that keeps him alive, not the repetition of the subject matter. As we approach our various jobs, let's not fall into "minimal think" of how little can we get by with, but how much can we accomplish: "maximal think."

5. Keep important.
This doesn't mean we don't have to do important things. It is as possible for academics as it is for you to find yourself doing the right thing. The important thing is not to get involved in a variety of issues, he is...
We also have to live fully and satisfy our curiosity.

And most satisfying is to live fully and satisfy our curiosity.

Individuals, as most individuals, are not spontaneous; they are not the way to live fully and satisfy our curiosity. If one comments on me, my response is, "Yes, I was a bit busy, having those papers completed.

I think that these tasks are not urgent. The basketball team appears to be well managed, and the counselor who works with them. If you are not able to let the client know that we are doing our best to complete the urgent, usually to the client's satisfaction.

It is easy to let the client know that urgent tasks are more important than unimportant ones. We recognize these tasks as such and we are not usually tempted to spend much time at them. The trick comes from the other two corners of the grid—the urgent but not important and the important but not urgent. It is easy to let the urgent drive out the important. The interrupting phone call, the concentration-breaking comment from someone walking by the office can feel urgent because they press themselves on us from the outside. The all too frequent casualty of such interruptions is the important but not urgent: writing that article, preparing the next class session, or reading that new journal article. These are important, but they don't have the same time demand and thus make them easy to put off. Pacing means keeping the important ahead of those items that seem urgent.

It may require a closed office door or a remote corner in the library to work without interruption. Pacing belongs to our non-academic lives as well. We can't let health or family matters that are important get crowded out by the "urgent" interruptions we face daily.

5. Keep intellectually alive.

This doesn't seem like something that would need comment in a university setting, but yet it has subtle aspects. It is as possible to be intellectually dead in the world of academe as it is to be intellectually alive in what might seem to be a dull job. I have a good friend whose job is as an engineer for Amtrak. By his own admission, it is not terribly challenging to keep a train on its tracks, and driving the same route on a regular schedule is not the most stimulating. Yet this man is intellectually alive. He reads more books in a month than many of us do in a year. Whether it is history or novels or current issues, he is as informed as anyone at this university. He between the urgent and the important. He describes a 2-by-2 grid with important and unimportant on one axis and urgent and not urgent on the other. Those things which are urgent and important, for example an injury requiring medical assistance or grading final exams will of necessity demand our attention. On the opposite diagonal are the unimportant and non-urgent. These frivolous activities are not bad—they might help our pacing by providing some of those much needed breaks. Things like playing solitaire on the computer, watching the late show, browsing through magazines, are not urgent or important, but we recognize them as such and aren't usually tempted to spend much time at them. The trick comes from the other two corners of the grid—the urgent but not important and the important but not urgent. It is easy to let the urgent drive out the important. The interrupting phone call, the concentration-breaking comment from someone walking by the office can feel urgent because they press themselves on us from the outside. The all too frequent casualty of such interruptions is the important but not urgent: writing that article, preparing the next class session, or reading that new journal article. These are important, but they don't have the same time demand and thus make them easy to put off. Pacing means keeping the important ahead of those items that seem urgent.

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uses his frequent layovers and downtime to read and keep his mind active. The other side of that coin is that even on a university campus, it’s possible to get into a rut and lose interest in the world around us. Even in the great research universities, there are those whose narrow focus can be as limiting as a factory assembly line. While active research should enhance teaching, there are too many examples of research happening at the expense of teaching. “Grinding out one more publication” can be as confining and non-stimulating as tightening one more bolt. I have always been proud of the way Grand Valley’s commitment to a broadly defined scholarship is geared toward excellence in teaching. Mentoring undergraduate research, being active in professional societies, leading a seminar, or publishing a paper are all considered active scholarship. I have made it a practice to join reading groups. If I couldn’t find one suitting my interests, I’d start one. For the last few years, I’ve been part of the Science and Religion Faculty Discussion Group reading and discussing books in that arena. By the way, this semester our group will be meeting on alternate Wednesday afternoons if you would like to join us.

6. Tough decisions are necessary for the best results.
An important part of the administrator’s job is making those decisions. Some are routine: approving requisitions, signing grade-change forms, approving recruitment plans. These easy decisions have little impact on the course of the university. Other decisions get more important: curriculum, budget, personnel. While most curriculum decisions are made by faculty committees, there are times when the administrator has to intervene. Budget allocation can be tough, but it is the budget requests and the timing of such requests that can be even more challenging. Yet in the long run, it is the personnel decisions that are the hardest and the most important for the success of the university. The academic tradition of shared decision-making with maximum input on personnel matters has protected us from arbitrary or capricious rulings. Nevertheless, there have been times when the dean’s perspective and responsibility have required making difficult decisions. Over the years I’ve been involved in over 2,000 personnel decisions—tenures, renewals, tenure-track, non-tenure-track, disciplinary actions. I had to act consistent with my own values, and I always tried to act fairly. Any decision I made was always for the best interest of the student. While difficult, it is rare for the case of difficult decisions to be made for the sake of doing what is not only best for the student, but is also in my self-interest. Nevertheless, a person wise in the ways of the world is usually better equipped to navigate the tough hard choices appropriately.

That tough grade or difficult decision for the student is usually better served by a mentor who can make a major difference, not only for the individual, but for the institution.

7. Ask the right question.
There is the old story about the student who was challenged to pray a prayer, but who was confused about whether to pray or not. The Abbott: Well, you didn’t ask the right question. “Am I supposed to pray or not?” The response was “You asked the wrong question. The right questions for you are: ‘Does the university have money?’ and ‘Does the university spend it?’ Then the student was told, ‘If the university spends money, then it has money; therefore, the question is often deemed appropriate and can be answered. But the other question is often deemed inappropriate.

8. High expectations.
It has been demonstrated that aspirations often depend on expectations. If we have high expectations for the world, we tend to rise to those expectations. The minimal, the attainment, the justification of society is that we
1. To read and write that coin is that easy to get into a okay and us. Even in the those whose story assembly teaching, happening out one more non-stimulating always been proud to a broadly influence in teaching being active in or publishinghip. I have seen. If I couldn’t do it. For the last years, and Religion discussing books our group will moons if you

2. for the best

3. administrator’s job is one: approving decisions, approving decisions have little other decisions about, personnel. made by faculty administrator tough, but it such requests the long run, hardest and the university. making with as protected Nevertheless, perspective and difficult decisions.

4. nel decisions—from initial appointments to contract renewals, tenure, promotions, and, in rare cases, disciplinary actions. There have been very few times when I had to act contrarily to what has been recommended to me. But in these and all the other hard decisions, it was always for the betterment of the university. And in the case of difficult personnel decisions, they ended up not only best for the university, but for the individual as well. A person who is not a good fit for the university is usually better off where there is a better fit. Making hard choices applies to faculty as well as administration. That tough grading decision can be the challenge one student needs to improve or can be the encouragement another student needs to stay involved. No, every grade doesn’t get this analysis, but we all know tough decisions can make a major difference for a student as well as for the institution.

5. Ask the right question.

7. There is the old story about the novice at the monastery who was challenged by the expectation for frequent prayer, but who had a serious smoking habit. He asked the Abbott: Would it be all right if he smoked while he prayed? The response was: “Oh, no, that would not be appropriate.” Later he was complaining to one of the more experienced brothers who responded: “You asked the wrong question. You should have said: ‘Is it all right if I pray while I smoke?’” Making the right decisions often follows from asking the right questions. I have had faculty come into my office with the question, “Does the university have any money to support XYZ, my pet project?” My response has sometimes been: “The university spends over 100 million dollars each year. Yes, it has money; the question is whether this project should be supported over other expenditures either proposed or ongoing. Asking the right question often puts the appropriate answer in perspective. Asking the right question is often the route to the successful response.

8. High expectations.

9. It has been demonstrated over and over that our expectations often determine the level of achievement. When we have high expectations for our students, they will tend to rise to that level. When we let them get by with the minimal, they will gladly do so. One curse of our society is that we have lowered expectations. We have
entering students who want to know the least they have to do for an acceptable grade. The love of learning, the
desire to excel beyond expectation does not seem to be as prevalent in today's students as it was when we were
students. (Maybe we just have faulty memories?) But our consumer-driven higher education has put us in this box. To change this dynamic, we must challenge our
students to excel, go beyond the minimum, and seek true understanding, not just enough facts for the test. High
expectations apply not only to our students, but to us as well. I have heard complaints that the expectations
for faculty members or staff have changed since being hired. That is true, and it should be. As an institution
we should seek higher expectations for our students, for ourselves, and for our university. I am proud to have
been a part of a Science and Mathematics Division that has continually set high expectations for itself and for
each of its members.

I have long been intrigued with the phenomenon known as the placebo effect. In medical experiment after experiment, this effect is so powerful that we cannot truly say a medication is effective until we have tested it in a double-blind study against a placebo. Test results have shown that the sugar pill can alleviate pain and symptoms often at the 30% level or more. The human mind is so powerful that the mere expectation of relief from a particular treatment can produce that effect whether the pill has an active chemical ingredient or not. Self-fulfilling prophesy works in negative as well as positive ways. Dwelling on the negative can indeed lead to negative results. When Alan Greenspan predicts a decline in stock prices, the market goes down. Self-fulfilling prophesy is also a powerful force when dealing with institutional vision. In my early years as Dean of Science when our enrollments were under 6,000 and declining, two vice-presidents told me that Grand Valley would not see another new building on its campus "in our professional life times." Having been totally convinced of the serious inadequacies of the old Loutit Hall, I said to myself that if I believed that analysis, then I should move on to another university. Instead I vowed to do everything I could to prove their

prediction wrong. As budget times, budgets grew, and enrollments grew, Grand Valley grew. The first state-funded new building in over a decade. Since then the vision of many to create new programs, and continuing to keep positive self-fulfilling prophesy as vision, alive is

10. Networks
An unfortunate focus on individual accomplishments has replaced societal good. We are more concerned with anyone else than a quality education. Athletes are high in the top, while our general student population is neglected. We have great athletes, yet we cannot agree on the vision of what our school should be. Many of our endowments are small and thus we cannot set the standard of excellence that most people would expect. We have more than 3,000 students who struggle to meet basic needs and yet too much attention is not being on the societal good. Too much attention is being on individual accomplishments.

11. Differentiation
When I came to Grand Valley it was a cluster of colleges, not a unified institution. The independent colleges were much different than most of the institution. Their mission was much narrower. When we reorganized...
least they have a chance of learning, the results do not seem to be the same. When we were younger, we remember (memories!) But when we were combined with other factors, it put us in this challenge our system, and seek true opportunities for the test. High expectations for students, but to us there were the expectations since being young. As an institution for our students, we are proud to have an arts Division that serves for itself and for

phenomenon experiment after experiment that we cannot revive pain and courage. The human phenomenon of relief that effect ingredient or negative as well Life can indeed go down. 3,000 institutions of higher education that struggle to meet budgets. We, as a society, have paid too much attention to these islands of excellence, while neglecting the need to build and sustain networks of excellence that will serve the whole population. I have been proud to be a part of a university that serves so many first-generation students, that takes seriously its commitment to the community, that is happy to partner with K-12 teachers and students to improve science and mathematics education at all levels, and that puts more emphasis on student success than on its own prestige. Let us continue to build networks of excellence.

prediction wrong. It took 10 years through some tough budget times, but Grand Valley did get back on track, enrollment grew, and the new science complex was the first state-funded building for Grand Valley in over a decade. Since then it has been the positive self-fulfilling vision of many that has led to numerous new buildings, programs, and continued progress as a university. Let’s keep positive self-fulfilling prophesy, otherwise known as vision, alive in our university.

10. Networks not islands.
An unfortunate consequence of our country’s intensive focus on individual freedom is the celebration of individual accomplishment at the expense of the greater societal good. We have produced more Nobel laureates than anyone else, yet our school systems fail to provide a quality education for all of our citizens. Professional athletes are highly paid and sometimes highly regarded, while our general level of physical fitness is below par. We have great artists in music, art, theater and cinema, yet we cannot find the funding to teach the arts in many of our schools. A few elite universities with huge endowments and highly selective admissions claim to set the standards for everyone else. Yet the successes of most people come from education at the other more than 3,000 institutions of higher education that struggle to meet budgets. We, as a society, have paid too much attention to these islands of excellence, while neglecting the need to build and sustain networks of excellence that will serve the whole population. I have been proud to be a part of a university that serves so many first-generation students, that takes seriously its commitment to the community, that is happy to partner with K-12 teachers and students to improve science and mathematics education at all levels, and that puts more emphasis on student success than on its own prestige. Let us continue to build networks of excellence.

11. Different is not necessarily bad.
When I came to Grand Valley some 28 years ago, it was a cluster-college structure and I was dean of one of the independent colleges. Grand Valley was different than most colleges, but the cluster college served the institution well in the 60s and 70s when there was much innovation and unrest in higher education. When we reorganized in the early 80s, there was great
concern that what had been achieved would be lost in a new structure. But different was not necessarily bad. That new divisional structure united the disciplines with their related professional programs to encourage interaction. The integration of discipline and application was a strength. After much debate and discussion, the decision has now been made to embark on a new organizational structure, one that will put together the arts, humanities, social science, natural sciences, and mathematics in a new college unit. It will be different, but not necessarily bad. To the science and math departments I say: Welcome your new colleagues. Be leaders within the new structure even as we as a division have been a leader in the old structure. Find new allies and new connections to disciplines from which you have been organizationally separated. To the professional schools: Don't forget your old colleagues. Don't run away from the decades of philosophy that found great value in keeping the disciplines and the professions together. While the professional schools have earned independence, it is not wise to drift away from the underlying disciplines that inform the professional curricula. Let's all make this new organizational structure work. It will be different, but that is not necessarily bad.

12. Titles are not important.

Over the years people have sometimes assumed I would move on to other positions while climbing the academic administrative ladder. It became clear to me early on that the Provost and President positions at Grand Valley were unlikely to be vacant for many years. Two good friends of mine did go on to become university presidents, and I have followed their careers. They moved to parts of the country I wouldn't want to live in, faced issues less interesting than what I had the privilege of dealing with, and in both cases they ended up at odds with their boards and eventually got fired. Meanwhile Grand Valley kept growing and becoming better. I knew that what I was doing was more important than the title on the door. For me it has finally come down to two things which I have sought in my professional life. One is the knowledge that what I am doing is worthwhile and second is an inner sense of well-being. These 28 years at Grand Valley have enabled me to meet these two criteria for satisfaction and that has been enough. As I look to my next certain that the title I will be don't worry about an inner sense of proud when a so with one last

13. Share the

A wise person, share the

"It is remarkable, and you can't worry about the Mathematics Department received a lot of success. The division have received awards, outstanding awards. We have more grants than for success in our successful Mathematics/Science graduates. Personally, I share the credit. First I wanted to be dean's office. I have contributed, and have made over the years been appreciated in the new language of cooperation and consistently cooperation in such a cooperation with support staff in the background to recognized, the unrecognized, appreciated and that has been one of the things that has been and I look back at Grand Valley
would be lost in the disciplines and tasks. The disciplines themselves are what we do, not necessarily bad. The disciplines are the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. The sciences encourage the application of knowledge and discussion, but the humanities and the social sciences are a new approach. Together the disciplines of the sciences, and the humanities, will be different, and the needs of the disciplines will be different, science and art.

13. Share the credit.
A wise person, in fact it was my Father, often told me: "It is remarkable how much you can accomplish if you don't worry about who gets the credit." The Science and Mathematics Division has accomplished a lot and has received a lot of credit. Over the years members of this division have received more that our share of MAGB awards, outstanding teacher recognition, and student awards. We have been recognized for creating a most successful Science Olympiad program, for receiving more grants than the rest of the university combined, for success in outside funding and endowments, for a successful Water Resources Institute, a vital Regional Math/Science Center, and for thousands of successful graduates. Personally, I have received more than my share of credit and let me help balance the account a bit. First I want to acknowledge my associates in the dean's office. Donna, Neal, Pat, Cindy and Cheryl have contributed immensely to this division's success and have made my life so much easier. The unit heads over the years have given so much to the operations of their departments in a role which receives much less appreciation than is deserved. Their roles will increase in the new larger structure, and they deserve your cooperation and support. Faculty over the years have consistently come up great ideas and have worked hard in such a cooperative spirit. It is much appreciated. The support staff in the offices and labs who work behind the scenes to make the rest of us look good are often the unrecognized heroes in our endeavors. I have also appreciated and give credit to a university environment that has been conducive to development and growth. It has been and I am sure will continue to be a joy to work at Grand Valley State. I want to also publicly express my thanks to a supportive family and especially for the support from my wife and life partner (Whom I have invited to become an honorary faculty member for this afternoon to attend this session.) I have been truly blessed over these years and am pleased to acknowledge this sharing of credit.

Some people have described my decision as retirement; it is not. I plan to work just as hard, if not harder, as a faculty member as I did as dean. Nor am I stepping down. I do not consider taking up this new role as a step down. Instead I am stepping out of one role and into a new one. I am returning to the role I first envisioned when I left graduate school. I am looking forward to the student lives upon which I hope to have a positive and significant impact.

While these reflections come out of my years as an administrator I feel confident that they apply as well to my new role as full time faculty. With these thoughts and reflections I now look forward to this last semester as your dean, and, with great pride and joy, I anticipate joining you in my new and just as important role as a faculty colleague.

Thank you.