Tracking the Grand Valley Presidency

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Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol31/iss1/5

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Tracking the Grand Valley Presidency

There is a (probably apocryphal) picture of a college president, perhaps modeled after Woodrow Wilson when he was President of Princeton, of an older, distinguished looking gentleman who serves sherry to the deans in his paneled office at 4 pm as they gather to discuss academic issues. The president leads and directs the discussions and periodically interjects the wisdom garnered from his long years of teaching, reading, and reflecting. From time to time, he may welcome foreign dignitaries to campus, and when the occasion calls, he speaks out on social issues.

That picture, if it ever was based in reality, is nearly unrecognizable now. As University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman puts it, "University presidents have ideal forums from which to speak on many issues, but the position of a university president is more complex than it was 50 or 100 years ago. The pressures of funding sources, the varied constituencies we must pay attention to, these realities make the job more complicated and challenging, but also present understandable constraints. Once, some presidents may have been able to sit back and be sages. You can't today."

Her understanding of being a university president is reflected in the advertisements for presidents in the Chronicle of Higher Education. The typical ads call for a president who is a visionary, a charismatic communicator (being good at sound bites would be a plus), a proven fundraiser, a dynamic leader, a person demonstrably committed to excellence and diversity. Interestingly, it is rare to see a call for a president who is above everything else an intellectual exemplar or an academic leader. The Grand Valley faculty, writing to the Board about what President Murray's successor should be like, acknowledge that "the president of a modern university is expected to fulfill a variety of responsibilities [such as] raising external funds, developing solid relations with state government, and articulating a vision for the institution."

The president of a modern university is a person whose days do not involve deans and sherry but instead often involve angry parents, curious reporters, disgruntled legislators, complaining students, agitated faculty, and staff. Today, with a flood of phone calls from students, staff, and local officials, and with a national audience willing to report on every effort to keep up with presidents, they have not lost favor; look around the grand, home, Western Michigan, and Grand Valley campuses: resignations of deans and other faculty members are a different skill set. The university's brand is good fortune to the president, and leadership of the faculty.

Grand Valley faces the local community and the state for dollars. The new president is expected to attract a strong candidate. A speculation is that C. Ott, and C. Ott, and Dr. James H. Murray had a national reputation and had a national reputation and attract a strong candidate. Murray served as president from 1962 to 1968. Murray had not been admitted as being the second as President.
and staff. Today's president deals with stacks of paper and tries to keep up with a flood of emails about everything from funding requests from faculty and students, to ideas for improvements, to complaints. Instead of making wise pronouncements about current national and international issues, the president explains decreasing state support, rising costs, increases in tuition, the size of the faculty raises. In between emails and meetings, there are phone calls to make and return; speeches to prepare and give; appointments to keep with parents, students, faculty, donors; daily contact with persons who are angry about something the university has done or angry because they have not done it. Add to an already full workday the early morning strategy breakfasts and the dinners and parties to give and attend, and it is a job that stretches from early morning to late evening.

It is also a job that keeps the president very visible, very public. Thus, Bierce's cynical insight applies to university presidents as well. Even those university presidents who are acclaimed upon their arrival can quickly lose favor; look no further than Harvard's recent president or closer to home, Western Michigan's. Fortunately, since it was founded in 1961, Grand Valley has had three excellent but very different presidents, the resignations of each of whom have been met with genuine regret among the faculty. Each of the presidents brought to the office a different style, a different skill set; each played a different but important role in the university's brief history; and importantly, each had the good sense or good fortune to turn over to their capable Academic Vice Presidents the leadership of the faculty.

Grand Valley State College was chartered by the State in 1960, after the local community met the legislative challenge to raise one million dollars. The newly chartered college needed a president, and the college's Board of Control conducted its search by winnowing an initial list of 80 candidates nominated by various authorities in the field of higher education. A special committee of the board (L. William Seidman, Arnold C. Ott, and Grace Olsen Kistler) interviewed the finalists and selected Dr. James H. Zumberge, a geologist at the University of Michigan who had a national reputation. Zumberge's strong credentials and academic reputation lent instant credibility to the foundling institution and helped attract a strong, albeit not very diverse, group of faculty. Dr. Zumberge served as president during the critical first six years of the college, from 1962 to 1968. Because Grand Valley's pioneer class of 226 students was not admitted until the fall of 1963, President Zumberge and a small group of pioneer faculty had a year to organize, to get the curriculum finalized, to order books, to line up additional faculty.
was actively involved in building the college’s academic structure and practices. Zumberge is arguably the most traditional of Grand Valley’s three presidents (it is reported, for example, that he would only sit with the full professors at lunch). Zumberge, Potter, and the pioneer faculty fleshed out their vision of a very strong academic institution through an integrated, rigorous, traditional liberal arts curriculum with stiff reading lists and required tutorials. The spirit, if not the letter, of that original vision continues to inform the curriculum and the practices of today’s university.

Grand Valley State College was new, the curriculum was ambitious and challenging, and the pioneer students who graduated did so with an excellent education. Not surprisingly, however, a challenging, rigorous curriculum at an unknown college was not attractive to many prospective students, and the fledgling college simply did not show the growth the legislature had expected. As a result, the legislature began to pressure Grand Valley to enroll more students and better serve the region. After six years of getting buildings finished, making countless decisions, and facing daily challenges and pressures, President Zumberge tired of administration and left Grand Valley supposedly to return to the joys of teaching. (As it turned out, Zumberge didn’t teach for long but went on to a series of administrative posts that culminated in his service as the ninth President of University of Southern California.)

Like the two presidents who were to follow him, Zumberge had a very capable academic vice president, and George Potter was considered as the possible successor to Zumberge. But in the end, and in light of the pressure from the legislature to admit more students, it was thought that Potter was too committed to a narrow vision of liberal arts education to help the college grow. After he was not chosen as Zumberge’s successor, Potter left to become President of Ramapo College in New Jersey.

Grand Valley’s second president was Arend D. Lubbers, B.A. from Hope College, M.A. from Rutgers University. Recognized recently by Congressman Vern Ehlers as “the nation’s longest serving university president,” Lubbers led Grand Valley from 1969 to 2001. He has the distinction of being the only president to serve as President of Grand Valley State College, Grand Valley State Colleges, and Grand Valley State University, naming two of the new programs in education and improve the quality of life.

Lubbers was appointed as President of Grand Valley at age 37 when he took the helm as one of Life’s youngest presidents. He was personally grounded in his grounding in education. His goal was to attract new graduate programs in education.

Lubbers is notable because he Allendale campus was a major donor began by leaving the academic programs he is also remembered for the faculty and the individualizing education students from one college and followed by thinking the way back to a single college, small schools, and what came (at one point, according to Loosein and Loosein, Lubbers during Grand Valley).

Together, Lubbers and Grand Valley throughout the 1980s had not grown in funding to allow for the serpentine downsizing and minimum costs, with the cost-cutting responsibility back on track faculty hiring.

Through it all, Lubbers was available and accessible, keeping his difficult decisions and the sense of the President’s judgment. One important way he accomplished governance was that he was not only recognized by the Board in 1982; by 2000
Zumberge is remembered for many things, among them building the Allendale campus, establishing a strong presence in Grand Rapids, building a donor base and strong community ties in Grand Rapids, initiating academic programs, and building an endowment for Grand Valley. But he is also remembered for building a strong sense of community among the faculty and for encouraging innovation. During the interest in individualizing education in the early 1970’s, Lubbers oversaw the expansion from one college to four separate and distinct undergraduate colleges, followed by the painful contraction in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s back to a single college. He experimented with “modules,” divisions, and schools, and with the administrative structure of his own administration (at one point, President Lubbers had two academic vice presidents, Bruce Loosein and Glenn Niemeyer, though Bruce’s position was eliminated during Grand Valley’s financial difficulties).

Together, President Lubbers and Vice President Niemeyer saw Grand Valley through one of its darkest times. By the late 1970’s, enrollment still had not grown significantly, state revenues had dropped precipitously, funding to all state universities was cut, and, according to Dean Emerita Mary Seeger, the legislature briefly discussed the possibility of using the serpentine dorms on the north side of the Allendale campus as possible minimum security prisons. President Lubbers responded with different cost-cutting measures, but he was ultimately forced to lay off 14 tenure track faculty in 1980-81.

Through it all, President Lubbers and Provost Niemeyer remained available and in regular contact with the faculty and Academic Governance, keeping them apprised of, and as much as possible, involved in, the difficult decisions that were necessary. As a result of the deliberate efforts of the President and Provost, the faculty who remained were loyal, and in important ways, the college community grew closer as a pattern of shared governance was established. Once past the crisis of 1980, Grand Valley not only recovered but began to thrive: Grand Valley had 6,366 students in 1982; by 2006 its enrollment had climbed to 23,295.

University, name changes that reflected Lubbers’ constant drive to change and improve the institution.

Lubbers was an interesting choice for the new college. Following a stint as President of Central College in Iowa, Lubbers was still a young man of 37 when he took over from Zumberge as President of Grand Valley. Named as one of Life Magazine’s 100 most important men and women in 1962, he was personable, approachable, articulate, bright and ambitious. Though his grounding was in the liberal arts, part of his charge at Grand Valley was to attract more students to the university by developing professional programs in education and business, and he did so successfully.

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President Lubbers remained always visible on campus and was known for his campus “walkabouts” that would often occur Friday afternoons when few faculty members were in their offices. Lubbers would stroll through the various buildings until he found a faculty member, would invite himself in, and proceed to chat with the astonished faculty member. He was generous to a fault and consciously sought to treat employees well and fairly—part of his notion of community building. For example, there is a story told about a tenured faculty member who tried unsuccessfully to organize faculty and during the process said some unkind things about the president. The next year, the same faculty member sought additional funding from the President to do research in France, and President Lubbers readily agreed. If “be kind to all, but especially to your enemies” was his motto, in the end it was aimed at building a cohesive community.

It is clear that President Lubbers was enormously successful at building a Grand Valley community of faculty and staff as well as the physical plant and the reputation of the university. Over the thirty plus years he served, his vision for the university changed, but his vision was always for everyone to see. Publicly affable and friendly, he could be intense and tough when the situation demanded it. Over most of those thirty plus years, Dr. Niemeyer handled academic affairs always in consultation with, but without interference from President Lubbers unless and until the force of the office was called for. For example, during the difficult decision to close the cluster colleges, President Lubbers exercised the kind of leadership needed at that time.

The third time the Board set out to hire a new president it used the services of a search firm. The search narrowed down to two candidates, one with strong academic background, one with a strong non-academic background. When the Board announced Mark A. Murray as the third president of Grand Valley instead of the more traditional, academically-trained candidate, there was consternation among some of the faculty. But Murray offered good people skills, a wide network of contacts, and extensive experience in state government (including his service as the
Treasurer of the State of Michigan). Beyond that, he was unassuming with an irreverent sense of humor, intelligent, totally present during discussions, a careful listener, and a decision maker. Notably, when he resigned the position five years later, there was again some consternation among the faculty, but this time it was because he was leaving too soon.

In fact, during his five years as President of Grand Valley, Mark A. Murray proved himself to be widely read, a very quick study, a decisive leader, and he was a constant and enthusiastic supporter not only of the arts, but of institutional quality, of fair funding from the State, of the place of student athletes and Division II sports, and of the importance of liberal education. Although he did not have the academic background some faculty hoped for, he understood and championed the cause of liberal education. For example, in a 2004 Grand Rapids Magazine discussion with four area college presidents, it is President Murray who shifts the discussion to the important role of liberal education: “I think we’ve got to return to questions of the strength of the core liberal arts. As the pace of change accelerates, and as people know they’re going to be doing multiple career changes, you come back to the grounding of critical thinking, basic knowledge of cultural distinctions, orientations and viewpoints, capacity with mathematics and logic, language.”

President Murray also pushed hard for better student retention and graduation rates. He promoted measurable standards and results. Like President Lubbers, Murray recognized and worked to strengthen Grand Valley’s academic community, and with strong and frequent promptings from his Academic Vice President Dr. Gayle Davis, President Murray made increasing the number of faculty a priority. He also successfully advocated for increased state funding. It is one of his hallmarks that when the funding for other state universities was cut, Grand Valley either was cut less or actually received an increase. When there was money for increases, Grand Valley got larger increases than most of the others. Despite strong pressure to continue the phenomenal growth of the university, Murray made the decision to slow enrollment growth and allow it to start to level off. Like President Lubbers, President Murray was content to turn academic affairs over to the Provost, and with the President’s support, Provost Davis started the
process that culminated in the revision of the university's mission statement one year and the reorganization of the university's structure the next.

So Grand Valley has had three very different but effective presidents, each with a skill set that fit the university's needs. In light of what each provost was able to add to the presidents' contributions, it can be argued that Presidents Zumberge, Lubbers and Murray were simply smart enough to not meddle in academic affairs too much. Each seemed content for the most part to leave academic issues to their academic vice presidents and to step in only when necessary. Zumberge, of course, was thrust into academic affairs because of the small size and newness of the college. Lubbers had to step in most visibly during the layoffs, but apart from that, both Lubbers and Murray chiefly confined their activities to fund raising, state relations, development, and community outreach.

In their letter to the Board, Grand Valley faculty make clear that they expect Murray's successor to be someone who has "the ability to work closely with faculty" and "embrace the cooperative model that has served this university, its faculty, and its students so well."

And that model has. The three presidents and their provosts working cooperatively with faculty governance (though not without some acrimony from time to time) established Grand Valley as a place where liberal education and effective teaching are prized. In light of its size, it is a rare thing that this university has been able to present to prospective faculty the opportunity to be part of a university community that embraces a balanced life of teaching and scholarship and thereby attracts a talented pool of applicants.

However, as Grand Valley enjoys more success and recognition, there will be the strong temptation to begin to take ourselves ever more seriously and to respond to increased pressure from students, faculty, alums, and donors to place greater emphasis on scholarship and research and to "move up" to Division I athletics. President Zumberge (who did not like sports) never faced that kind of pressure, and both President Lubbers and President Murray successfully resisted the pressure; but the university's current balance is delicate and will be increasingly difficult for a president to maintain, though the Leadership Criteria used to select Murray's successor provide an excellent starting point. The first criterion among the Grand Valley search committee's "Leadership Criteria" is a call for "A Visionary," but unlike the typical Chronicle advertisement, the committee adds they expect a visionary whose vision "is compatible with the university's mission." The second criterion is an "Academic Leader" with "a commitment to high-quality undergraduate and graduate education" who will "involve faculty, students, and staff to work together in establishing a clear sense of institutional identity and pride." As long as Grand Valley's fourth president pays attention to criteria set forth by the search committee, follows the lessons of the previous presidents, and values what the faculty term the "cooperative model," this university should continue to thrive.

Frank paused, his hands waking up. The cold dawn a pat on the back, the frost so thin the frost so thin the frost so thin the frost so thin the frost so thin they gobbled up the debris and cupped in one hand hiding a taste of the harvest. As long as Grand Valley's fourth president pays attention to criteria set forth by the search committee, follows the lessons of the previous presidents, and values what the faculty term the "cooperative model," this university should continue to thrive.