From Hard Hat to Provost: A Story of Success at Grand Valley

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FROM HARD HAT TO PROVOST:
A STORY OF SUCCESS AT GRAND VALLEY

—adapted by the editor from an interview with Glenn Niemeyer

Yes, of course, the title is intended to tease you into reading this essay, but it isn't false. Glenn Niemeyer's interview for a position at Grand Valley included donning a hard hat and being taken by George Potter, Assistant to the President for Academic Affairs, similarly topped, on a tour of Lake Michigan Hall, then being built in the middle of an abandoned farm. It was February, 1963, and many colleges were looking for people with Ph.D.'s. Having grown up and been educated in Michigan, Glenn had wanted to try living elsewhere for awhile. He had gotten some offers from small liberal arts colleges in Washington, Oregon, California, and Colorado. But then he heard about a new and experimental college which was about to open near Grand Rapids. Despite the lure of the West, this new college offered a unique experience—to try out some of his own ideas about teaching, to shape the curriculum of a history department, and to be part of the building of a new institution.

One of his professors tried to discourage him from going to a new college with no reputation; that was not the way to start a career. But in 1963, it was easy to think that if one didn't like a job after a year or two, one could easily get another. Besides, Grand Valley State College was the only college that sent its offer to him in a telegram.

When the college opened in September, for 226 students and twelve faculty members, Lake Michigan Hall was still being built. Nevertheless, classes commenced; students and faculty simply shared the environs with full-time hard hats and flies swarming in through the apertures of the building; they had to speak up over the sounds of pounding, scraping, and buzzing. Sidewalks were yet to come; planks served as a way to get from muddy parking lots to buildings. Glenn and Marvin DeVries, an economist who taught math that first year (and later became Dean of the Seidman College of Business), shared an office that they would have to vacate soon, because it belonged to President Zumberge, whose office was still in Grand Rapids. When, in January, the President was ready to move onto campus and Lake Superior Hall was completed, Glenn and Marvin packed all their books and papers into a plastic cart each, topped it with their desk and chairs, and moved into an office there. When Lake Huron Hall was ready a year later, they did it again.

Glenn and John Tevebaugh were the History Department for the first two years. Although both had specialized in American history in their graduate work, John taught the Western Civilization course, and Glenn taught "Problems of Modern American Society," a kind of introduction to Social Science. Each taught a class of 60 to 75 students, lecturing to them three times a week and holding discussion sessions of 20 to 25 once a week. The tutorial was the special feature of the college. Students would meet five times a week, based on their assignment. Special choice was chosen to remember these tutorials and the interaction they afforded.

When, at the end of Memorial Day, nobody showed up for the meeting at odd time, they pursued the answer: "Are you educated?" and "What about the curriculum, but to shape the both age and experience of most holding Ph.D.'s of the college. They didn't always get more diversity about them. In 1965 George Potter and the disastrously low student to the system. Glenn got together to talk and were chosen to approach an education at Grand Valley themselves CONANED. The first education was already.

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would meet five times a term in small groups with the professor to present papers based on their assigned readings, not in textbooks, but on reserve in the library and specially chosen to show varying interpretations of historical incidents. Glenn remembers these tutorials as being extremely valuable in the level of instruction and interaction they afforded both the student and the professor.

When, at the end of that first school year, a faculty assembly was called for Memorial Day, nobody thought it strange, and everybody came. They were used to meeting at odd times—over lunch, even at night—to carry on discussions which pursued the answers to such questions as, "What does it mean to be liberally educated?" and "What, in fact, are the liberal arts?" They met not only to shape the curriculum, but to shape the content of what they were teaching. They were young, in both age and experience, but they were, in Glenn's opinion, extremely well qualified, most holding Ph.D.'s, and very much committed to shaping an excellent liberal arts college.

They didn't always agree, and by 1965, it was clear that there was more and more diversity about the meaning of "liberal arts." At the first faculty assembly in fall, 1965 George Potter announced that the curriculum had to be changed: the disastrously low student enrollment indicated that students were not being attracted to the system. Glenn, Marvin DeVries and some members of the Science Division got together to talk about new programs, especially in the professions, and Glenn was chosen to approach the president, who, they knew, was opposed to professional education at Grand Valley. When Zumberge didn't say no, this group, calling themselves CONAP (Committee on New Academic Programs) went ahead in their planning. The first new programs to emerge were in Business and Nursing (Education was already in place).

In 1970, the new president, Don Lubbers, asked Glenn to be the Academic Dean. Glenn really liked being a professor: he was a popular teacher, had published a biography of Ransom Olds for the Michigan State University Business Series, and was working with a professor at the University of California, Irvine, on a book about William Durant, founder of General Motors. But he accepted the new position, continuing to teach one class and write articles on Durant, until the frequent interruptions of his class for emergency deanly matters led him to give up teaching and scholarship altogether. When, in the seventies, Grand Valley became a cluster of colleges, Glenn became Vice-President of the Colleges for Academic Affairs. In 1980, he was also appointed Provost. And, although I have not personally seen him do it, it may well be that he still puts on a hard hat to visit new buildings in progress on the campus (or thinks about it).