A Field for Dreams

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Dreams! For centuries men and women have been motivated into action because of dreams. From a young Jewish boy with a multicolored coat several thousand years ago whose destiny and that of powerful nations were foretold in dreams, to a young Afro-American preacher a few decades ago whose dream activated a nation to address years of inequities, dreams, whether real or idealizations of personal goals, have activated people for centuries. Dreams have been the subject of great literature of the past and have formed the basis for modern films. At times it has been as mundane as attracting a legendary baseball team to a field in Iowa. "Build it and they will come!"

For early faculty at Grand Valley State College, the dream was building a unique institution in a cornfield in Allendale. Although there were some visions of buildings and other physical facilities, for most faculty it was the anticipation of being part of the formation of a college at which we would not repeat the mistakes that other institutions had made or introduced during their development.

"The Dream" is what attracted both faculty and students to this new institution. It certainly was not the physical plant, for it was essentially non-existent. It was not the programs—there were none. It was not the alumni or the exhibited value of a GVSC education, for these were some distance into the future. It was the dream to develop programs, the opportunity to actually build the curricula and philosophical underpinnings of the institution.

In our first few years, there were many issues to resolve and, consequently, much interaction between faculty. It was the second year of the college's existence before a faculty retirement plan was adopted. There were multiple debates, which sometimes went on into the evening (even during blizzard conditions), on "What is a liberal arts institution?" Although the debate was vigorous, there seemed to be a sense of unity among the faculty: people worked together. Personal agendas were set aside, and directions that represented faculty consensus were mapped out. Most faculty members were very supportive; a few, including one or two of the most colorful debaters, became disenchanted and left the institution to establish their dreams elsewhere.

In those early years, it was observed that an increasing number of faculty were members of many committees and, consequently, had insufficient time for teaching and professional development. The faculty passed a resolution that no faculty member was to be a member of more than two committees, a resolution that was rather short-lived, as is readily evident today.

One issue in which there was both great unanimity as well as significant disagreement was the design of the program for the training of teachers. It was generally understood that Grand Valley would include programs to prepare K-12
teachers, but there was great debate as to how best to accomplish it. There was strong agreement that what other institutions were doing should be significantly improved and that we should not have a proliferation of methods courses (a characterization of most education programs of the time) and that teachers learn by observing and doing. What emerged was the Teacher Aiding Program, a feature of many of today's teacher preparation programs.

As one can imagine, in starting a college in the early 60s, there was strong sentiment against developing into a "publish or perish" Institution. Grand Valley was to be a college in which excellence in teaching was of prime importance. Faculty should be rewarded for good teaching, not for research. On the other hand, there was an equally strong attitude that this institution was not to be an extension of high school. The curriculum was to be designed and delivered to teach the students to think, not simply to recall facts and regurgitate the content of a professor's lectures. The emerging library was an integral part of all instruction. In all disciplines, students were required to utilize the library and to write papers. Faculty met in tutorials with groups of three-to-five students on a regular basis to assist them in developing their thinking and writing skills. This was a time-consuming but very valuable experience for faculty members. As a young faculty member, I probably learned as much as or more than many of my students did through these experiences. Unfortunately, the influx of students and the increasing time commitment of the faculty for tutorials led to their weakening and ultimate demise.

Although faculty members were occupied with charting the course of the new school, not all the students were similarly involved. There were no planned student activities, so inventive students designed their own. Outhouses and other imported items were the focus of some pranks, but the most impressive one was the student painting of the Grand Valley water tower. Only recently, in a discussion with two students in that Pioneer Class, was I privy to the details of how it was accomplished.

Changing offices or classrooms as buildings were completed during a semester was a regular occurrence during those early years. At the time of my first visit to campus, Lake Michigan Hall was mostly completed and portions of Lake Superior Hall were occupied. Other than the Great Lakes complex of buildings, the campus consisted mostly of fields. During those initial years, I occupied an office in most of the academic buildings on campus, in some cases even on several different floors. Getting stuck in the muddy parking lots, which had not yet been paved, was another frequently expected challenge.

Library accumulations were growing as fast as possible in those early years, but a major teaching tool for mathematicians was non-existent on campus: we had no computer. In the '60s, of course, no desktop computer was available, only large and medium-sized mainframes. Prior to coming to Grand Valley, I had taught a FORTRAN course for mathematics and science majors at another institution. (That language certainly is complained about the on numerous occasions.) It was necessary at Grand Valley in debating the necessary deficiency. During my days in which we debugged computers traveled to Argonne computer facilities. We had computers to run our outdated, but were arrangements not student made regular basis. on the basis of these successful professionals.

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Although it was evident policies and structure for faculty members (Dr. discipline. We were mathematicians on the mathematics curriculum courses have since changed, but virtually present. In fact, even been added.

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Although it was exciting to be one of thirty or so faculty members developing the policies and structure of a new institution, it was even more exciting to be one of two faculty members (Dr. Dan Clock was the other) developing the curriculum for a discipline. We were both second year faculty members; there had been no mathematicians on the faculty during the first year. Dan and I determined a four-year mathematics curriculum and service courses during our first year. Many additional courses have since been added as the programs and mission of Grand Valley changed, but virtually every course in the original curriculum has survived to the present. In fact, even the numbering scheme has survived as new courses have been added.

One final anecdote. My first quarter (before we changed to the semester system) at Grand Valley was the beginning of the second year for the Pioneer Class of students. These students had taken Foundation courses their first year, which included no precalculus material, and I had the dubious honor of teaching them in the first calculus class on campus. What the students had in enthusiasm, they lacked in preparation. During the first year of operation, it had been decreed that any Grand Valley student could enroll in calculus independent of mathematical preparation. I questioned the dean about that decision, but he was insistent that such a policy was appropriate. I had taught calculus for several years elsewhere and very quickly realized that many of these Grand Valley students were very inadequately prepared in basic precalculus fundamentals. Predictably, about half the class failed, which led to some heated discussions between the dean and me. As a result, in the second
quarter, I taught a much smaller class in Calculus II and tutored many of the students who failed so they were prepared to take Calculus the next quarter. By the beginning of the following year, a precalculus course was in the curriculum.

In recalling those early days of Grand Valley, I have many pleasant and rewarding memories. I was very fortunate to be part of a faculty which really developed an institution, one which has deviated from some of those early ideals, but which, nevertheless, has emerged into an institution consistent with most of those original dreams and aspirations. To my former colleagues, administrators, and students, my deepest and sincere gratitude for a rare and rewarding professional opportunity.