



When the U.S. economy dipped into crisis mode late last summer, Grand Valley's Seidman College of Business leapt into action. The college held a series of public roundtables to help area businesses and laypeople understand what was going on. Seidman faculty members were regular fixtures in local — and even national — media. Even one of Grand Valley's founding fathers, former FDIC chairman L. William Seidman, participated. Dean H. James Williams led the charge into action.

Williams came to Grand Valley in 2004. He is a Certified Public Accountant, Certified Management Accountant, and an attorney with a wealth of practical experiences in the public accounting profession and in the legal profession. He talked with *Grand Valley Magazine's* Brian J. Bowe about the crisis, its impact, and what the future holds for Seidman College of Business.

GRAND VALLEY MAGAZINE: Seidman College of Business responded very quickly to the economic crisis in September with public events and educational

Q&A

H. JAMES WILLIAMS

outreach. Why did you think that was important?

WILLIAMS: I thought it was important for us for a couple of reasons. First, there is a mutual respect and support here between the university and the community that I haven't seen in other places. I think the community feels a certain responsibility to support Grand Valley, and we feel that same kind of responsibility to make sure that we're providing what we ought to be providing for this community. So for that reason alone I thought it was critical.

As the business school and university of this region, we had a responsibility to make sure that this unique historic business issue was brought forward in a way that allowed for this community to be as informed as possible. We are endowed with experts in economics, finance and accounting and business that really put us in the best position to be able to conduct a conversation that's informative, touches the entire community, and brings to bear not only our resources, but those resources we can tap in the community. So I thought we were uniquely positioned to respond, and I think we did a good job.

GVM: What are your thoughts about the economic crisis? Are we really in the middle of something unprecedented?

WILLIAMS: I think it is clearly an historic event. Folks talk about this being as bad as any time we have experienced economically, going back to the Great Depression. In the '80s and '90s when things got tough, I don't think folks had this kind of concern. There wasn't this overall loss of confidence by the public — and I'm talking about the business public as well as the lay public. I think it has made a big difference to the business community that we're suffering through what we're suffering through now.

Everybody's concerned. I have the honor and the privilege of working with a lot of great business minds in this community, the kinds of conversations I'm getting are really scary. People are really concerned about the ability of their businesses to withstand the recession that has hit us — and probably has been with Michigan from the early 2000s. People are really concerned that the next couple of years are going to be tough.

GVM: What kind of impact will this crisis have on Seidman College of Business?

WILLIAMS: It affects us along two dimensions. First, it affects us tactically. As we work to deliver an effective business education, now we have a world laboratory like we have not had before. As we try to deliver the messages, we can reference what's happening right now in a way students can appreciate. We can use this time to make the learning experiences even more meaningful for students. Faculty are referring back to what's happening — I know that's true in my teaching, and I hear from my colleagues that they're doing the same things in their classrooms.

It's also affecting us strategically. We're asking ourselves what happens in the long term, how must our strategic plan change given what has happened and what we expect to happen in the next year and a half. Some significant adjustments will have to be made. For example, we pride ourselves on keeping our graduates here in this region and in the state. Well, if jobs here are going to be dwindling like they've dwindled in the last few months, what are the implications for how we make sure our students have opportunities to be gainfully employed once they finish this program? Who are those potential employers,

and how will we make sure that we are right in line with them as a business college?

That's one of the concerns we have. We've been talking a lot lately about how broadly we reach across the Midwest and nationally. We're working on having a national presence, a nationally recognized brand. When our students leave here, we want the whole nation at least — and the whole world at best — to be open to them and to understand the quality that Grand Valley and the Seidman College of Business represent, so they know they're getting good quality folks to work with their companies.

GVM: One of your current priorities is to increase the profile of the Seidman MBA. Why do you think that's important?

WILLIAMS: I believe that the country will continue to require leadership from people who have a really good understanding of business functions and how to recognize business opportunities and how to take advantage of them. I believe that our MBA degree, in particular, is especially appropriate for training

and educating leaders of the type that this country is going to need in order to move forward in the future.

GVM: You worked with Bill Seidman on a pair of events in Washington and Grand Rapids. What was that like for you?

WILLIAMS: It was fantastic. Bill is an expert of experts. He is considered to be the patriarch of financial analysts. It is a great boon for this community and college of business to have him so aligned with us, so supportive of what we're trying to accomplish and so committed to his hometown. He has worked tirelessly to make sure our name is recognized around the nation. I know that if I need him, I can call him.

The kind of experiences he's had over the years, the kind of thought he's put into these matters, and his ability to bring it home plainly, to lay it out in ways that even laypeople can understand is just beyond comparison, and we know that we never have to worry when we have Bill Seidman here — folks are going to come to listen.



photos by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

H. James Williams, dean of the Seidman College of Business, looks on as former FDIC chairman and Grand Valley founding father L. William Seidman delivers a breakfast lecture in the DeVos Center in October.