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Remarks – Fall 2018

This summer, after a year of dazzling speed and busyness, I had some time to breathe and think. I started dwelling on the world, the confusion that seems to permeate the political stage, the overt hatred and violence in the United States and across the globe, and the relentless assault on education. And, I was thinking more locally about our university, the changes to our budget and the upcoming departure of a true leader.

At moments, it was overwhelming. So, as philosophers are wont to do, I picked up a favorite book – Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In it, Frankl depicts the triumph of the human spirit above the abject degradation and racist violence of the Nazi camps. The topic seems dark, but Frankl’s work is one of hope, not horror. He reminds us that our legacy lies in the integrity we have, the projects that animate us, and the relationships that we embrace. As I was reading, I realized that regardless of what is occurring on the world stage, we have a place here at Grand Valley that embodies every one of the virtues that Frankl extols; our integrity in realizing the unqualified good of education, the work we do to educate our students, and the community we build with one another. Reading Frankl again, I felt truly grateful to be in our place. It is a privilege I do not take for granted. And my job is to continue to ensure that these virtues continue to shine brightly.

I know we are coming upon some changes and people have expressed some fears to me about President Haas leaving, and the restriction of the budget and what that will mean. As educators, we know that change is inherent to the transformative effects of what we do every day. We are change agents. I do not believe you would be here if you did not hold the belief that education is an unequivocal good, and change is at the core of that good. Please trust that we will continue to be the excellent institution that we are because of the people who we are.

Now, a few specific items for this year.

Yes, we are going to have a new president at this time next year but please know that we have an excellent presidential search team, all of whom are committed to liberal education and our unique place in the world of higher education. They will find us the right person.

We have our Higher Learning Commission reaccreditation visit scheduled on November 5 and 6. Assistant Vice President Chris Plouff is leading the process, but I want to thank you personally for all the work you have done in preparation for the visit. We are telling our story to the site team, and it is a great story.

We are entering a different budgetary environment than most of us are used to. This year we have trimmed the budget across the university. This is due to fewer student credit hours, which generate our operating budget. My office worked collaboratively with the deans to focus those cuts where they would be felt the least. I want to be sure everyone knows that we put a fence around professional development funds and student wages; neither was cut – the former to ensure that faculty have the opportunity to grow as teacher/scholars; the latter as student employment is a retention strategy. Assistant Vice President Bowen and I will be holding town hall meetings this fall to help everyone understand the budgeting process more thoroughly.

The budgetary situation creates intentional focus for us. I know with absolute certainty that every one of us is committed to student learning. We want our students to expand their knowledge and understanding, their skills and their ability to engage as civic agents in the world. When we see that students are not finishing their degree, we know we have to act to help them. Here are a few things that you can do:

1. Keep the quality of teaching high and offer students help to achieve the standards you set. Actively reach out to students to be sure they are learning successfully. Don't wait for them to come to you. This is needed in both our undergraduate and graduate programs. The quality of our programs are the best way to attract and keep students engaged; there is nothing more important to me. Educating is why we are here and we must do it exceedingly well, for the sake of our students', our own intellectual engagement, and the contribution to our community. We are the standard bearers of intellectual inquiry. If we do not uphold the values of seeking truth, questioning, collaborative inquiry and moral standards, who will? It is our responsibility to society and a joy to do so.

Last year, the Deans and I began a conversation about how to ensure that students have quality learning opportunities. How do we know we deliver the best education possible? Do we provide a space where intellectual engagement is primary and multiple perspectives flourish? How do we facilitate ongoing conversations about pedagogy, about how to reach students, about the real lives students lead? How do we make co-curricular experiences intentional and relevant to our students' education? How can we be innovative to meet the needs of the 21st century while maintaining the liberal education foundation that is critical for our students?

Many of you were part of these conversations. I would ask that you continue to engage them. Talk with your colleagues, use the data available, and reach out to students. Simple, yet the greatest way to impact our students.

2. Please never pass up the opportunity to check in with students. Remember students often don't know where to go for help and they are shy to ask for it. But we know

where they can get help. Be pushy! Students need our personal attention and are truly grateful for it. On a serious note, you might not know that last year, more than 2,000 students received counseling, and 17,000 students participated in mental health wellness programming. We need to think about how student well-being affects academic success. Fortunately, we have a new Vice Provost and Dean of Students, Dr. Loren Rullman, who cares greatly about this. He and I have been discussing ways that the expertise of our entire division, both academic and student affairs, is fully actualized and collaborative.

3. We have a new way to help students in need. It is called the Momentum Fund, named to help our students keep persisting when life's setbacks present economic challenges. This came about during a conversation I had with Michelle Rhodes, Associate Vice President for Financial Aid. She was telling me that sometimes she has a small fund to help students whose registration has been put on hold because of an unpaid bill. Often the amount is small, \$100 or \$200. Yet they cannot register for classes until it is paid. When she can, and after investigating the bill, she will pay the bill so the student can register. However, she doesn't always have the funds to do this. So, we came up with the Momentum Fund. What would be a month of ice tea at Starbucks for me, could prevent the downward spiral of a student – for instance, from having to pay to get a flat tire repaired, to then not being able to pay tuition, to dropping out of school. Small amounts from us can really help our students. This is a pass through account, which means our money goes directly to students without having to build up an endowment. Our small sacrifice can mean the world to a student.
4. Soon in Noteworthy, you'll be getting information about a new initiative around the topic of water. I will tell you now that it is very exciting but will send more information soon.

I ask you to think about the changes that will come in the near future, not as an unknown but as a chance to manifest the core work we do. Our identity at Grand Valley is one of innovation and creativity. We will draw on this as change comes and create an even better place for our community to thrive. I have absolute confidence in you.