

Grand Valley State University: Delivering on the Public Good

by Thomas J. Haas, President
Faculty-Staff Address
Allendale, Michigan
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Good morning. What a beautiful day to begin a new year at Grand Valley State University. Thank you for gathering with me to continue our tradition of opening each new academic year with a conversation about our purpose and our future. We have chosen our life's work to educate students, and, as we know, when we pass on lessons and share new experiences, we affect the future.

I would like to welcome members of our Board of Trustees who join us today. And it's with extreme appreciation that I acknowledge my cabinet members who join me today and every day in setting Grand Valley apart.

We have a new academic leader this year: our new Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs Maria Cimitile. While she's been with the university for nearly two decades, she is new in this role. Maria follows Gayle Davis with her own strengths, style and plans for innovation and success. You will be hearing more from her as the academic year begins, and I know each of us will work with her to ensure continued progress and leadership from the provost's office.

My wife, Marcia, and I are beginning our 12th year of service to Grand Valley, and she joins us today as well.

During our time here this morning, and before we gather with students at the formal Convocation ceremony, I want to talk with you about:

- **The challenges we face as a public university in Michigan;**
- **Why education is a public good and why the Laker Effect matters to the world;**
- **And, where we are going and why we all have a role in creating a positive future.**

There's the business we are all in: education; and then there's the business of education. Let's address the business of education first.

Our financial health allows us to get to the best part of our jobs here – educating students. As you know, we face challenges in our state: a trend of declining state support and a decreasing number of students graduating from Michigan high schools.

I want to put your minds at ease. Part of Grand Valley's history is being nimble and efficient, and we are managing both.

On the positive side and with much gratitude to all of you, our faculty and staff, the state Legislature once again recognized Grand Valley as the most efficiently run public university in Michigan. They come to this conclusion by looking at our retention, graduation rates and efficiencies, and by witnessing the Laker Effect throughout Michigan.

You should give yourselves a hand for your collective role in the outcomes that matter!

This means that we were given the largest percentage increase in state support this year, but because of our history as the university with the lowest funding per student, the dollar translation is not quite where we would like it to be. So, we ensured our costs would be controlled, resulting in our tuition still being in the lower half of Michigan public universities.

My administration and the Board of Trustees take these decisions seriously. Our goal is to maintain the highest quality and show you are valued, while giving students the education and experiences they need to make a difference in their world and the world around them.

We've done that, and that's why you will see continued steady and efficient operations and high-quality students enrolling at Grand Valley.

That brings us to our second challenge: demographics. Enrollment is everybody's job but let me give a shout out to Vice President Chick Blue, Jodi Chycinski, Michelle Rhodes and their staff members. We had a record number of applications this fall, and we met our goal for the number of first-year students on campus this fall. We don't have final numbers yet, but it looks as if we will welcome 4,100 FTIACs to campus.

While this is always a feat to be celebrated, each year this becomes more and more difficult to achieve. This is why we must put more effort toward retention. These efforts include improving academic advising and financial aid packages.

In the past 10 years, Grand Valley has seen an increase of 8 percent in head count and an almost 25 percent increase in degrees awarded. We must continue to explore ways to increase retention. And whatever your position on campus, you have a role to play in keeping students progressing toward a degree and a more fulfilling career and life.

We are always and must continue to be motivated by delivering on the public good. That ideal is the backbone of our strategic plan and strategic decision making.

Another challenge we face is debunking some myths surrounding education — one is that a college degree is not necessary. While all honorable work is to be lauded, you have more freedom to choose the

type of work you do if you are fortunate enough to earn a college degree and exhibit the fruits that come with that level of education.

We all know what they are: critical thinking skills, and the ability to work with those from different disciplines and backgrounds. Exposure to more ideas and to the arts creates a depth of experiences that results in creative solutions and meaningful outcomes.

The message from us must clearly be that Grand Valley is relevant for students, their families, and for our communities.

At Grand Valley, we are committed to the principle that education is a public good. We are committed to making a college degree affordable and accessible to more people, who, in turn, contribute to the health of our state.

One of my endeavors this past academic year was to accept the appointment by Gov. Rick Snyder to chair the “21st Century Education Commission.” I worked with colleagues around the state and produced a report with the subhead: *A Blueprint for Educating Michigan’s Residents to Build the Best Businesses, Win the Best Jobs, and Achieve the American Dream.*

Throughout the process, I thought about our state’s long commitment to public education. Since the Northwest Ordinance passed in 1787, Michigan has recognized the importance of education.

What’s striking when you go back and read about the creation of the Northwest Ordinance is how many times its authors spoke of the happiness of the people — the happiness not just of individuals, but of Americans as a people. We don’t talk that way anymore. But Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Hamilton all thought that the happiness of people was linked to education. This is the reason they enshrined the principle of education in every single township that would be settled as the nation moved west.

It was a bold idea in 1787, and it has lost none of its force in 2017. Education promotes happiness because it expands people's vision, their audacity, their skills, their choices, their opportunities, and their imagination for how to work together for the common good.

The Brookings Institution challenges those of us in higher education to ask, "Are we a leader, ladder, or laggard when it comes to the pursuit of the common good?" This I know: Because of your dedication, Grand Valley is definitely a leader in its class. We definitely provide a ladder of opportunity for our students to help them develop their potential and contribute to the common good.

I am nearly done reading Tom Friedman's new book, *Thank You for Being Late*. I was struck by how he related that our nation and globe are in the midst of rapidly accelerating change from technology, the environment and society. Grand Valley is operating in this state and in order to survive and thrive, I know that we must adapt ... and we must do this continually. I think one of our strengths, given the challenges I shared before, is that Grand Valley represents an institution that is adaptively stable — an interesting paradox. Therefore, we must continue to innovate and be entrepreneurial with keen attention to quality as our new provost has reminded me.

We most definitely are not a laggard!

Let me quickly go through some of the highlights of the last year that illustrate why we are a leader when it comes to pursuing the common good.

We are creating programs and facilities that will matter to our future. And we are supporting the people who will teach and learn in those programs and facilities.

We've had a busy summer. In June, we purchased the Ferris Coffee and Nut facility near the DeVos Center. Dean Paul Plotkowski is busy planning uses for that wonderful building. It will house the Padnos College of Engineering and Computing's Design and Innovation Center. It's clean space, perfect for our needs and many are excited that the coffee shop will remain open!

This purchase saves us from constructing a new building and allows us to move next summer. The plan calls for spaces where students from multiple disciplines will work together and develop projects for our industry partners.

This is who we are — this is the value of Grand Valley. We can be innovative while providing an exceptional talent pipeline to employers.

Education is a public good, and Grand Valley is delivering.

The state acknowledged that principle and the university's successful outcomes by investing \$29 million for a new addition to our Health Campus. Board Chair John Kennedy and Vice President Matt McLogan tirelessly explained our history of positive results and our goals for the future to lawmakers in Lansing. We're grateful for their support of the new facility at 333 Michigan on the Medical Mile that will be connected to the Cook-DeVos Center for Health Sciences.

This \$70 million project announced in July will create additional spaces that our students in the health professions and nursing need. Construction will begin in June 2018.

Grand Valley is the leading provider of health care professionals in the region and demand has exceeded our ability to accept highly qualified students. That's why we're also building Raleigh J. Finkelstein Hall on Lafayette Avenue, which will open in May.

The construction of these two new buildings is a major turning point for Grand Valley's health programs and an example of how we are producing graduates that the region and state need to fill jobs in the health care industry where the need is tremendous.

Anecdotally, we all know that when we go to a doctor or hospital in the area, we're often taken care of by Grand Valley alumni.

These buildings also provide great examples of how Grand Valley can be a good neighbor and a strong community partner. Finkelstein Hall is going up in the Belknap Lookout Neighborhood. Pat Waring, James Moyer, Lisa Haynes, Tom Butcher and others worked closely with the neighborhood group and the City of Grand Rapids to make sure that the university, city and the residents will be satisfied with our expansion and presence in the end. We signed a memorandum of understanding that includes items like hiring residents for on-site jobs, building affordable housing as part of the project, and going back to city payments in lieu of taxes. We care about our students and we care about our communities.

Education is a public good, and Grand Valley is delivering.

It's a public good with a great deal of private support. Vice President Karen Loth and her team are busy connecting donors to Grand Valley's mission, so these projects and many others can be built, programs can be developed and our students can thrive.

We launched our **Laker Effect comprehensive campaign** in June. We believe this campaign — with a goal of \$85 million — is needed to help all students succeed, and to give employers access to the exceptional talent they need and expect from Grand Valley.

It is about the transformative power of Grand Valley, for our students and our community. It's about the potential to do so much more.

We call this **the power of what can be.**

Our goal is to more than double our current number of donor-funded scholarships.

We are increasing support for student success programs. We want to provide students with the help they need to succeed through programs like counseling, tutoring, mentoring, leadership development, and experiential learning.

We intend to put \$52 million toward academic programs, special centers and capital projects. We want our students to start, stay and succeed!

And you are making it happen. Here's something we all should be extremely proud of: our faculty and staff are among our staunchest supporters. You give back to this university at a rate that is the envy of universities around the country.

Nearly 55 percent of you invest in our students by giving monetary donations, along with your time and talent. That's amazing.

Talent. That brings us to our newly named Center for Performing Arts, which we will reopen today after extensive remodeling and expansion. Marcia and I feel blessed and honored to be at this university and to have enjoyed incredible performances by our talented faculty and students. We couldn't be more pleased to connect our name to the building and give our support to the students who will learn and perform there and to the faculty who will create new possibilities within the spaces.

We'll celebrate the dedication at 2 p.m. today, and I hope you will join us.

Today is a day of celebration. We welcome our students back with our formal Convocation ceremony.

We celebrate the beginning of each academic year because we believe in our mission to educate students to shape their lives, their professions and their societies.

Which leads me to the Laker Effect.

We make a real difference in every community in which we have a campus and in every community in which our graduates live and work.

That's the Laker Effect.

We affect the local economy:

The university's total economic impact in just the three counties of Kent, Ottawa and Muskegon is \$816 million!

We affect people:

We have a student who developed an app that helps connect seasonal farmworkers with farms that are hiring.

A student in Seidman College of Business started a bakery that employs people with special needs.

We have an interdisciplinary group, made of up physical therapy, engineering and psychology faculty and students, helping children with disabilities become mobile and gain independence.

A group of students raised thousands of dollars to buy "shoes that grow" for orphans in Tanzania.

And a group of engineering students helped NASA. They designed a device to help astronauts gather and contain multiple samples of surface particles, and then went to the Johnson Space Center in Houston to test it!

We have students working with the Grand Rapids Symphony to expose African American and Hispanic students to music, and a recent graduate of the School of Communications received the Public Relations Society of America's highest award: the National Gold Key Award.

A group of students from our hospitality, tourism and management program spent two weeks in France working at the Cannes Film Festival.

We have students working on drug therapies to fight cancer and others working on Parkinson's research.

In every discipline, in every way, we are delivering on the investment the state, donors and families have made. We are producing graduates who improve our companies, our nonprofits and our communities.

We have a dedicated faculty and staff who enable these outcomes for our students.

We are a community that finds time to serve.

Every year hundreds of our students fan out across the country to help communities with projects they could not afford to tackle on their own.

We tutor students close to home and volunteer in countless other ways.

Last year, members of our football team swabbed the inside of their cheeks and registered as potential bone marrow donors. In May, a Laker tight end donated his cells to a man in Denmark in hopes of saving the man's life.

And so many other examples ...

The Laker Effect has no boundaries. You are the Laker Effect.

The fact that I began this address with a list of our institutional successes and end with a small sample of individual impact is testimony to the effect you have already had and the impetus to carry on our mission.

We have a fundamental responsibility to give the best to our students and to each other. We embark on our work this academic year strong in our commitment to public education and to the students who come here with the goal of enriching their future ... the future of their families ... and the future of their communities.

Thank you for listening and thank you for the work you do.