

2010 Opening Address to Faculty and Staff

Good morning and thank you for being here as we begin the first event of this academic year. For me, this is always an exciting day: there are new colleagues to greet, new students to meet, and new facilities to seek.

And, this year we have a special milestone: 2010 is the start of Grand Valley's 50th year. None of us would be here today – indeed, there would be no Grand Valley – had our founders not embarked on the daunting journey of creating a new college. For their dedication and success, we cannot thank them too often or too much.

This is a day of beginnings, and I want to start by asking those attending their first Grand Valley Convocation later this morning to stand. Welcome! We are proud to have you in our community. Next, I ask all returning faculty and staff to stand. You are at the core of our success. I want to lead a round of applause for 50 years well done!

Now, let's see who's been here the longest (ask employees to sit at 10 years of service, 20, 30, and so on until the last person standing is the most senior employee in the room. Identify and honor).

Now, let's get started. I want everyone here to join me in doing three things:

- Looking back – at where we started and how far we've come!
- Looking forward – what legacy will we leave to Grand Valley?
- Looking inward – what will you do personally to help launch our students into the next 50 years?

Looking back begins at the beginning. Grand Valley is a remarkable story, like no other in Michigan's higher education history. In order to obtain a college charter from the state, the founders had to raise a million dollars. That's \$24 million in today's money. And they raised it in just over a year. It was a breathtaking accomplishment.

After the money came the challenges of finding a location, developing facilities, explaining the dream, and attracting students who shared the dream. Had the founders known how hard this would be, perhaps some would not have joined the team. Today, we have 75,000 alumni who can be grateful for the vision of those dedicated and selfless men and women.

We need to recognize the courage of those pioneer students, the 226 admitted to the first class – willing to attend a school that had not taught a single student nor awarded a single degree. And, the faculty – brave enough to give up positions at more established institutions and take a chance on a new organization. To them, we owe everything as they set the standard of excellence that has allowed Grand Valley to prosper.

The incredible growth in enrollment over the decades – especially the last two – is testimony to the quality of our academic programs, some of which had not been invented at the time of our founding. Faculty governance, working closely with the administration, made this possible.

We could not have grown enrollment and added programs without offering relevance, rigor and quality. This enables us to attract talented students who achieve retention and graduation rates at the top of Michigan's public university rankings. In the past ten years, we've doubled the number of graduates that attend graduate school or that enter the workforce, most of whom practice their professions here in Michigan.

This is a remarkable return on investment to our donors, taxpayers, students, their families, and the citizens who live in the communities where our campuses are located. Every day, Grand Valley touches the lives of hundreds of thousands of Michigan residents.

This kind of success draws notice. Lots of it.

- Princeton Review calls us one of the “Best in the Midwest”
- We've been ranked in the “Top 10 Regional Public Universities in the Midwest” by U.S. News & World Report
- For fourteen years in a row, we've been named one of “America's 100 Best College Buys”
- We're in the Top 25 of the nation's “greenest” universities
- For seven years in a row we've had the nation's best Division II athletic program
- GVSU has been selected by the Kellogg/Woodrow Wilson Foundation for a program to increase the number of teachers in the STEM areas (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)
- And many individual faculty, staff and student accomplishments.

These accolades, and many others, are a reflection of Grand Valley's strength and stability. When I speak of stability, I mean it in every sense of the word: financially, academically, in enrollment, in the dependability of our graduates, and in our contribution to the economic health of Michigan.

We've built this strong and stable base together. The couple that achieves a 50th wedding anniversary has most often succeeded by crafting a great partnership. And that is what we have done at Grand Valley, with Boards, GVU Foundation, faculty, staff and administration working together to ensure the success of our students.

Our stability is also the result of the public/private partnerships and confidence that nurtures and sustains GVSU. Prospective students have rewarded that stability by becoming part of the Grand Valley community. Later this morning, when I greet our new students, I will tell them how proud we are that they – who could go to college anywhere – chose us.

We've enhanced our stability by developing a strategic plan that aligns us behind a common understanding, common goals, core values such as our commitment to liberal education, sustainability and inclusion, and measurable outcomes. This kind of stability is essential if we are to continue meeting the needs of our students, now and in the future. With a stable base, we have the flexibility to innovate, to seize new opportunities, to shape our future.

Which brings me to my second theme – looking forward: Yogi Berra reminds us that predictions are difficult, especially if they are about the future. The only thing we know for sure about the future is that it will involve change and our ability to lead and adapt. Our founders envisioned a small, non-residential liberal arts college that would mostly serve commuters from Holland, Muskegon, and Grand Rapids.

That is how Grand Valley was launched. And while liberal arts, superior teaching, and active scholarship remain at our very core, we have grown in ways unimagined by those who were here on Day 1. From a single campus with only academic buildings, we have grown into a university with five locations, relevant undergraduate and graduate programs, a rich student life, state of the art housing, enviable facilities, important research activities, and centers of excellence like the Johnson Center and Hauenstein Center. That kind of change takes confidence – about the future, our ability to shape it, and our proper role in it.

In Michigan today, higher education faces what could well be a sea-change. Our population is stagnant, we are producing fewer high school students, and not enough of them are choosing college after graduation, and if they do, many are choosing Community Colleges as a start to a 4-year degree. It may be that some of those high schoolers do not yet understand that the days of low skill jobs with high pay are forever over. And we have returning veterans and adult learners with a desire for a degree.

But it may also be that the old ways of attracting students are puzzling to today's electronic generation who subsist on a diet of smart phones, computers, ooVoo, MP3's and social networking. Chalkboards and sterile classrooms are things of the past. We make changes everyday to deal with the expectations of today's students who control so much of their own world with devices that we use to only see in comic strips. Remember Dick Tracy's wrist-watch? Today, it's for real. Droid, I-phone, Skype --- Chester Gould saw it all. We must be that smart, too.

Therefore, our greatest value as a university lies in our ability to prepare graduates for a new Michigan and a new economy. We must prepare them for the Michigan we know now and also for the Michigan of the future. Our ability to anticipate the future, adapt to change, and to lead in

times of uncertainty will continue to be the hallmarks of Grand Valley. Everything that we are today has come from our ability to handle those three words: anticipate, adapt, lead ... create stability ...

In anticipating the future we must also take note of the present. Appropriations are undependable and the state has become an unpredictable partner as policy and priorities change from one term-limited legislature to the next. However, excellent financial management and cost controls will always be part of The Grand Valley Way.

Never have those skills been needed more than in 2010, when our fellow citizens in Michigan are buffeted by record unemployment and an economic transition that has caused much disruption. Many of the families of our students are hurting, and we cannot carry on here as though that does not matter to us.

So this year, I have asked Grand Valley to sacrifice. Everyone will shoulder a greater share of their health insurance premium. Administration, faculty, and AP staff have accepted a wage freeze, joined by members of the AFSCME and Public Safety bargaining units. These are the right things to do and I stand with you, and thank you, for doing them.

I am also happy to note that private support from donors has led us to a record high endowment – something that gives us needed flexibility and additional student financial aid in these challenging times.

Our 50th Anniversary Comprehensive Campaign is poised to exceed its \$50 million goal, made possible by a stunning 50% giving level by faculty and staff – a percentage nearly unheard-of at a public university. That's three very nifty fifties: 50 percent, 50 million, in our 50th year. I've always said that Grand Valley is special. And by 2013 we will be in the Mary Idema Pew Library in Allendale and the L. William Seidman Building in Grand Rapids offering services and programs second to none. This shows it!

In the academic arena, we must be cognizant of tight budget times yet retain enough flexibility to expand programs with high demand and add faculty when we embark on new degree programs. Doing well with the resources we have will keep rigor and academic success front and center, exactly where it belongs. As I said at the beginning, and it bears repeating, in most key measures Grand Valley is at the top of the rankings, in concert with Michigan, Michigan State, and Michigan Tech – and not always in that order!

Our combination of high academic standards, our emphasis on liberal education, our great teaching, our scholarship, and the high placement rates of our graduates will continue to produce the talent our state so badly needs. We will do whatever it takes to keep our standards high and remain attractive to prospective students. But there is more.

This year, tuition will constitute approximately 80% of our total revenue, state funding 20%. Said differently, enrollment has never been more important. We must expand our market share in Michigan and the Midwest. We must be attractive to FTIACs, transfer students and graduate students. We must recruit more international students. We must foster higher completion rates and timely graduation.

Clearly we must retain more of the students who choose Grand Valley. We must be sure that our campuses are welcoming, tolerant, and inclusive. Let me say this is clearly as I can: Enrollment is Job One, and it is everyone's job. The best recruiting tool we have is to ensure that students get the best possible experience at Grand Valley. By doing our jobs well, we will deliver on that expectation and our students will persist to graduation.

An additional way to recruit is to provide to our students the combination of high quality academics and affordable tuition that we call "The Grand Value." Every time you develop a less expensive way to do a task, the money saved will take the pressure off future tuition adjustments. That will keep Grand Valley affordable, now and in the future. Saving, too, is everyone's job.

So far, I've addressed the past, the present, and the future. Now, let's look inward: what can you do to help ensure that Grand Valley remains the best possible launching pad for the next 50 years?

Ask yourself: Why am I here? What can I do to help train the next generation of Michigan leaders? What can I do to attract the best possible students to Grand Valley? What can I do to help them while they are here? How can I be a good steward of those who choose us? Those answers reside in each of you, and will likely be different from person to person.

No matter your job or responsibilities here, students are the reason for our work, so pausing to help a student is always the right thing to do. Time after time, our graduates tell us that the thing they appreciated most about Grand Valley was their contact with an individual (faculty, staff, coach, upperclass or graduate student) who became special, who reached out, taught, advised, assisted, mentored.

Most often, these relationships develop in the classroom, but not always: nearly all of us come in contact with students. Be on the lookout. Be helpful. Be a friend. We will always be measured by our delivering on our quality and service and fulfilling our promises.

That's the Grand Valley Way and it is the reason for our continued success. By caring for, and about, each other we have created a community sustained from a common purpose and enhanced by trust. We are all in this together, and it is an honor to be part of this remarkable team. Thank you.

But...we're not quite done. I've saved time because I want us to start a dialog. So, please – I'd like those in the audience to speak up (one at a time!) and share questions and/or offer some

ideas in two areas: what must Grand Valley address in the next 50 years; and, what can I do to help launch our new students into that future world. Suggestions please who is first?