# Sabbatical Showcase 2019

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What Gets Us Through?

A Meditation Photobombed by Spring

We begin today with a verse from the Song of Solomon: “For lo, the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing *of birds* is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Happy Spring. Happy CLAS Sabbatical Showcase. And to those who love baseball and who may have grown up with Ernie Harwell in their ear, happy Opening Day.

Today’s annual event—I mean the Showcase, not the Opening Day—displays the fruits of faculty research and governance work and is a chance to recognize some exemplary service. But this year it takes place in a time of unusual and unpredictable transition. It’s not just that the stern necessity of the numbers of available high school graduates, a demographic slide that still has some years to go, requires us to tighten our belt, and change how we do things and in some ways how we prioritize. What gets us through times of change in our circumstances?

Nor is the transition we face simply that simply that we are losing familiar and trusted leaders: of course, our colleague Tom Haas is stepping back from a successful 13 year run as our president. But you may not also know of the imminent departure of our widely respected Associate Dean Gretchen Galbraith. After 26 years at GVSU, Gretchen Galbraith will be taking on a new position as Dean of Arts and Sciences at SUNY Potsdam in July, 2019. At the risk of embarrassing her: what a loss! Gretchen joined the History Department in 1992 as a modern British and European women’s historian. She brought Reacting to the Past pedagogy to GVSU, which is now used by over 20 faculty across the University. Her faculty governance service has included stints on R&D, UAS, UCC, FSBC, and taskforce assignments relating to non-tenure-track faculty, salary equity, and the Ombuds role. Her more recent service has included participation in the pilot Student Success Network, NSOPAC, TRAC, the Holton-Hooker Learning Community, The Women’s Commission Family Leave working group, the Climate Study Faculty Action Team, and various leadership roles on the national Reacting to the Past Consortium board. In her administrative work, she has played a number of roles including Director of the Honors College, History unit head, and associate dean for CLAS (2014-19).

Today Gretchen is traveling. In early May, we will have a time to celebrate her when she’s actually in attendance. But we have been very lucky to have for so long a colleague, a leader and a friend of the quality of Gretchen Galbraith.

So, what gets us through leadership changes? What gets us, faculty and staff of a University committed to the best undergraduate education, through a time of fundamental change so that we don’t lose sight of the core of what we do?

The size of the class matriculating to college in the fall is significantly smaller, and so is the one after that, and the one after that. Just 80 fewer students would mean about $1,000,000 less in tuition revenue for each of the next four years; it’s imaginable, given the precipitous drops some other universities are experiencing, and the ebbing number of seniors in Michigan high schools, that the drop off could be four or five times that 80. The belt tightening will be real, and sooner or later, it will hurt.

To get through that, of course, we need to keep sight always of what, and whom, this is all for. And this year, we had many instructive looks at that. The recipient of this year’s CLAS Endowed Scholarship Kendall Keeler is an inspiring case in point. With a 3.91 in Behavioral Neuroscience, Kendall is motivated in her choice of studies by a horrific car accident that injured her sister and by her parents who never attended college. Kendall says she’s driven to do the best she can in school because she wants to show her three younger siblings that it is still possible to get a college education without the help of their parents who can’t afford to send them. That’s part of what President Haas meant by his claim that as a public university, Grand Valley is a *public* good.

I hope you had a look at the latest Grand Valley Magazine article about the many paths our Classics students make for themselves after graduation. It struck me that they demonstrate what a recent webinar called the “value narrative of education” which in the current climate we must articulate.

Consider the case of our alumna Kimberly McKenzie, class of ’03, who majored in international relations and German. She has a pretty high-powered job now. Her boss referred to her—in print—as “unflappable.” A nice compliment, to be sure, but really remarkable when you know that Kimberly is senior judicial assistant to Ruth Bader Ginsburg. At our core, we provide a rigorous liberal education, on an extended scale, to undergraduate students and students in select graduate programs. This depends on courses we teach in General Education and in the majors—and we must be excellent in both. Looks like Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Kendall’s sisters and brother are counting on the quality of the work we do.

But we do it in so many ways. I want to celebrate a few of the spectacular, inventive and influential things we’ve done this year, as the students and faculty of CLAS. It’ll help you get through.

First things first: our students excelled. Here are some examples:

* In 2018, 12 CLAS students were selected to receive the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship to fund study abroad.
* Alexis Hansen, a senior who is a double major in Psychology and Biomedical Sciences, won a national history award — the Joan Nestle Award — for her article on a topography of transgender studies.
* Opera Theatre, the Early Music Ensemble and the Department of Visual and Media Arts with the Grand Rapids Ballet School Junior Company involved singers, instrumentalists and dancers, and layered 3D projection design over their performances in “Masquerade: A Baroque Extravaganza."
* Homecoming Regent Lavar Green-Jackson is a lab assistant for Glenn Valdez of Psychology. They are conducting research on alcoholism to understanding why people experience depressive symptoms after long-term alcohol withdrawal.
* Sarah Lamar, who is earning a master's degree in Biology, won first place in our Graduate School thesis competition with her research, "Biological Invasions on a Large Scale: Investigating the Spread of Baby’s Breath Across North America," that she is conducting with AWRI.

We took exceptional care of our students, too. This year CLAS expanded advising and took on the oversight of tutoring. **With volunteers largely from CLAS, faculty and staff provided over 150 services to students in the Repair Clinics this year. Ingrid Johnson of Movement Science was selected by SHAPE America to receive the Mentor of the Year Award. And Paul Cook of Chemistry received the Distinguished Undergraduate Mentoring Award.**

Last week we celebrated the 35th anniversary of the Science Olympiad. An unbroken chain of Regional Math and Science Center and CLAS faculty and staff have supported our area schools and especially the pipeline of science students.

Faculty research was fabulous, global, and particularly praiseworthy for how you involved students. Bob Hollister of Biology was part of a team awarded a $1 million grant by the National Science Foundation to work with students to study the impact climate change has on vegetation in the Arctic tundra. Kristin Hedges of Anthropology and her students have been working with the Maasai in Kenya to produce traditional medicine resource works in book and poster formats. Alex Nikitin of Biology co-authored a paper in Science Advances on the genetic analysis of ancient warrior societies from the Great Eurasian Steppe. The Public Relations Society of America inducted new members into its College of Fellows, and Tim Penning of the School of Communications was among them—a very significant national recognition. Faculty were frequently in the news for everything from the structure of psychological studies to PFAS to running-shoe design. Frontiers are being pushed back, and it’s heartening how much Grand Valley is doing the pushing.

**CSCE Early Career Scholar Awards went to** Kyle Barnes in Movement Science, Katie Corker in Psychology, and Beth Peterson in Writing.

Your environmental work in the community was recognized: Rick Rediske of the Annis Water Resources Institute received the 2018 CR Evenson Award from the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and Roy Cole of Geography and Sustainable Planning and his wife, Mary, were nominated for a Governor’s Energy Excellence Award for their efforts in making their home energy efficient.

Our artists were not be outdone either. By the middle of last summer, Renee Zettle-Sterling’s book *Cast* had won 8 book awards and spun off an exhibition. Norwood Viviano’s work has been on frequent display, such as the installation in glass "Postindustrial" at the Chihuly Collection in St. Petersburg, FL and his work “Cities Underwater” in the exhibition ‘Metamorphosis: Changing Climate’ at the Hearst Tower in NY. The summer film project is gearing up as we speak.

Throughout the year, you kept the focus on teaching. You were everywhere to be seen at the Teach In and the FTLC conference. Through the work of the Faculty Council, Dr. Saundra McGuire spoke on campus about metacognition. You signed up as willing participants in the Teach Together initiative which will continue to be productive in coming years.

Your teaching was recognized with our most prestigious teaching awards. Shinian Wu of English has been selected by the GVSU Alumni Association as the recipient of the 2019 Outstanding Educator. The Niemeyer Award went to Steve Mattox of Geology whose teaching and work on his disciplinary pipeline were profiled in CLAS Acts recently. The Burch, Jacobs & Moore Diversity Teaching Excellence Award went to Julie White, Senior Affiliate of Writing. The Pew Teaching Excellence Awards recognized Chris Haven, Writing; Ingrid Johnson, Movement Science; Virginia Peterson, Geology; and Mary Bower Russa, Psychology. And David Clark was honored as one of the top Math Educators in the country by the Mathematics Association of America. What could be more heartening than repeated recognition of work that is not, as it turns out, always thankless, and recognition of our excellence in our core mission?

This has been a year of extensive and extraordinary accomplishments. No one year, of course, tells our whole story. But taking a cue from President Haas, we’ve snapped this quick college selfie, photobombed by Spring. It suggests that insomuch as we continue to return to our core mission, we should look at the future hopefully and confidently. Look around you: you get to work among wildly talented, relentlessly motivated and sensationally accomplished people dedicated to providing a liberal education that is accessible and affordable and excellent. This is our core. This will not, and must not change. We will continue to be a place to create the stories of student breakthroughs that our community and our state need to hear, to grapple with the complexity of the real, to nurture discovery, and in Jefferson’s phrase, “to follow truth wherever it may lead.” [[2]](#footnote-1)

We understand that things won’t look exactly as they always have, but that would be an unrealistic expectation of most things in life, disappointing if it were fulfilled. Even as we bid Tom Haas a grateful farewell in his presidential role, we can look to President Mantella for new energy and new vision. It should be exciting—I think it will be fun—to watch how an accomplished and savvy new person reinterprets and reapplies the Grand Valley legacy, to propel us forward. Our strong sense of ourselves–fully and clearly communicated—can only help her in this work.

If we are to afford to move into that future, there will be some hard-nosed decisions to make; but let there be no hard-hearted ones. The unrepealable excellence of our colleagues, physical evidence of which surrounds us today, will get us through, buoyed by our everyday commitment to mission in the life we have chosen, and the work we do so well.

1. Song of Solomon 2:12 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jefferson to William Roscoe, December 27, 1820, in [L&B](http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006664301), 15:303. [Polygraph copy](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib023957) at [Thomas Jefferson Papers](http://www.loc.gov/collections/thomas-jefferson-papers/about-this-collection/), Library of Congress.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)