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HAIL TO OUR ALMA MATER
Seidman School of Business Alumni
April 14, 2004
Arend D. Lubbers

Two events in the 19th century had a direct effect on Grand Valley: one in 1817 when the University of Michigan was founded, nineteen years before Michigan became a state; the second in 1847 when the Rev. Albertus Van Raalte led a group of immigrant Hollanders to settle on the shores of Lake Michigan, 25 miles west of the relatively new village of Grand Rapids. That colony of Dutch attracted more and they spread to the growing industrial and business center of Grand Rapids. At one time the census of Kent County revealed that forty per cent of the population had Dutch names and when combined with the figures in Ottawa County, the numbers soar. As recently as a few years ago Grand Valley research showed that 39% of the church population in Kent and Ottawa were Dutch Calvinist, 39% Roman Catholic. The point is that there were enough Hollanders to maintain and protect a culture. An important part of that culture was the establishment of two colleges, first Hope in Holland, and then after the inevitable split among theologically contentious Dutch, Calvin in Grand Rapids. They were nourished by their respective groups and developed into excellent liberal arts undergraduate institutions, distinguished until recently towards professional departments other than teacher education. They consumed higher education resources and the interest of a large segment of the region's population as they do today.

The fact that the state's oldest university is older than the state itself creates traditions and loyalties that might not be found elsewhere. The Americans who moved west into Michigan from New York and New England after 1825, already finished with acculturation, discovered existing higher education rather than founding it. This, I believe, was the case with those who settled Grand Rapids. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, they didn't enter much into the life of the Dutch colleges. The University of Michigan met their needs, and for some the agriculture programs at MSU and the education curriculum at the Normal School in Kalamazoo. In 1914 a Junior College was established which was mostly a prep school for the University of Michigan for those who could not afford four years in Ann Arbor or whose parents thought better grades and further maturation were required before taking on the curriculum of the university. J.C., as it was

known, was the last of Michigan's 29 public two-year colleges to initiate a full community college curriculum tied as it was to the tradition of being college prep.

Neither of these populations I have described felt the need for a broader course of higher education offerings. Given the conservative views predominant in the region, there was no inclination to seek tax dollars from the state for higher education other than a small appropriation for J.C. As other state universities grew and MSU fulfilled its education extension mission, Grand Rapids was a place to find enrollments and political support. That apparently satisfied the citizens of Kent County for many years. It is no coincidence that maize and blue are the colors for the University of Michigan, the Community College, and East Grand Rapids High School.

For the reasons put forth, I suggest that the second largest city and region in Michigan did not have a state-supported institution until after the mid 20th century. It qualified for one by any measure early in the century, and an argument can be made for its founding during the Grand Rapids population boom in the late 19th century.

When the political momentum began building for a state college, initiated and guided by Bill Seidman, it was not based primarily on a need for professional programs in this population center. Bill, a Dartmouth graduate, had the vision for a high quality undergraduate liberal arts institution. There were good private liberal arts colleges, and he thought the state of Michigan should make it possible for all qualified citizens to attend such a college. Seidman's leadership made it happen. He, as you know, was managing partner of BDO Seidman, Economic Counselor to Vice President and President Gerald R. Ford, Senior Vice President of Phelps Dodge, Dean of the Arizona State University Business School, Chairman of the FDIC under Bush I, and now at 82 years of age consults throughout the world. He is worthy of having his name on this Business College. Without Bill's drive and vision, none of us would be here celebrating the achievement of our three distinguished colleagues. His initial vision was crucial to Grand Valley's success, though our University grew beyond it. Finally he was able to articulate successfully to many leaders in west Michigan that the size and importance of the region deserved educational resources from the state. The appeal didn't need to go beyond that and the excitement of a new college here increased the momentum.

By the 1950's John Hannah had lifted MSU to a position of countervailing power to the University of Michigan in the politics of higher education. Though the maize and blue still flew highest on west Michigan flagpoles on Saturdays in the fall, the University of Michigan did not have total control in Grand Rapids. The standoff between the two giants gave Grand Valley independence because they both agreed to an independent college if their major rival agreed to forgo establishing a four-year campus based branch on west Michigan soil. The power standoff has proven to be Grand Valley's greatest blessing. Following shortly after guiding Grand Valley to charter status, Bill led the fight to give state universities and colleges constitutional autonomy in the new Michigan constitution. Of course, here too the agreement and power of the two major research universities on that issue helped carry the day.

Two factors at the beginning of Grand Valley, the commitment to the liberal arts core which is really an insistence that a person be educated to understand the human experience, the scientific method, and the nature of society, and an independent climate for development separate from overriding state bureaucracies created, characterized, and propelled our University.

When I arrived on the scene five years after the first class doors opened, I fit into the liberal arts mode, but two opposing elements applied their own kind of pressure – the Vietnam War and the student rebellion against it, and the pent-up need for education in professional fields that began accumulating decades earlier when a state institution should have been established. We designed a cluster of colleges, each with its own pedagogical mission and style, taking care of rebels, traditional liberal studies types, and students in need of a profession. The rivalries amongst colleges and cost inefficiencies led to the demise of the design. But through all the turmoil, the persistent call for high quality professional education was heard. As a more traditional university structure evolved, a place was made for professional education.

It was not easy. Though there were no legal restrictions, Grand Valley was independent. There was strong bureaucratic opposition in Lansing because though centralists had lost the constitutional fight, they were using back door techniques in an attempt to control university curricula. A furious battle over the establishment of a new law school raged. MSU, Western and Grand Valley claimed the right to one. When the legislature authorized all

three, I knew a deal had been made. The Governor's veto was assured for the funding bill. I decided then, with tacit Board approval, to launch the Business School while all the attention was focused on law. When the "dust settled" on the law school issue with no new law schools in existence, Grand Valley had a new Business School. It was legal and it was done. A nursing school depended on a large turnout of health education enthusiasts to face down the Lansing planners who really opposed it. The same was true for the School of Social Work. The Padnos School of Engineering was launched in the face of a personal censure by my state university President colleagues in a meeting that reminded me of a scene from a Kafka novel. Being called a University was a struggle. We were one in structure and complexity, but Governor Milliken blocked the change. Finally, during Governor Blanchard's tenure he bestowed the title on all of the state colleges by signing a bill agreed upon by legislators and the executive.

I think it is accurate to call the period from the late 1970's to the early 1990's the "time of trials." In this period we were formed. Often those at other colleges and universities or those with loyalties to them attempted to block us. This is not surprising, nor does it cause animosity in me. They had stakes in Grand Rapids and in state funding. Our system is competitive. There are laws of social action just as surely as there are laws of physics. We were successful and will continue to be because Grand Rapids and its region's economy, health care, social structure, and total culture need an indigenous comprehensive university. People for generations in our region did not understand this. They are beginning to understand now. Nearly 50,000 graduates and 20,000 current students make an impact that cannot be ignored.

Our two founding virtues remain important today for the qualities they brought to us. A commitment to the liberal arts often carries with it a commitment to high quality instruction. From our core has come an emphasis on high quality. We see it manifest in the large number of excellent students who seek admission today. I hesitate to mention this to an alumni group for the standards of admission are elevated to the point where many who have graduated could not now gain entrance. The progress towards excellence is not even, never is, but by all measures it has come to pass. The freedom to be what we designed, not what we were given or told to build, has energized us, made us more creative, and honed our skills in friendly and unfriendly competition. We have the pride in building what we thought to be the best.

Our “times of trials” taught us to listen carefully to those we were here to serve. Grand Valley was founded by the community and the “time of trials” reminded us and demonstrated to us that we were no “Ivory Tower,” free from any responsibility but to serve our own intellectual desires. We were here and are here to serve the community and the state. And that service reveals itself in the nurture and dissemination of knowledge to every student. It is the sacred responsibility of those who teach to tend to all academic and nonacademic needs of the student. It further reveals itself in an awareness of the community beyond the university and in seeking to help that community with the knowledge and research that is the special province of a university. When these two responsibilities are seriously embraced, a college or university avoids two debilitating pitfalls. The first danger to an institution’s effectiveness is arrogance. Arrogance comes from the inability to understand one’s own limitations. It tends to dismiss those who should be served. It is an evil microbe that attaches easily to those who believe they have more knowledge and intelligence than others. For schools with religious orientation, it sometimes takes the form of self-righteousness. We are right; therefore we are better than you. The second danger is the possible drift to mediocrity, or worse. With no clear view of mission and responsibility, in a profession where tenure is used more often as a protection for laziness than it is a protection of freedom for expression, it is not difficult to find colleges and universities stagnant and drifting. This condition usually leads to internal fights that make an institution all the more unattractive to those who observe it.

I believe Grand Valley’s great accomplishment is the avoidance of these pitfalls. No place is comprised of perfect individuals, but in Grand Valley’s case the positive ones outnumber the drifters and fighters by a large majority. For the most part, people have stayed on mission and the mission is forged in the service to students and community.

Just before retiring the Presidency and since, I have been asked what I believed to be my brightest achievement as President of Grand Valley. I always say survival. The claim I just made about our University depended, I believe, on the survival of many faculty and staff. There were significant numbers of us who stayed, and listened, and acted. We were around long enough to know what was necessary for the people Grand Valley was founded to serve. Some of this we knew from the beginning, some we discovered. We put in place the foundation stones of the University, an opportunity granted to one generation. That generation has to get it right. We

were contributors to traditions that characterize the University indefinitely - an awesome responsibility. I hope we gave to alumni and the University that which makes you proud.

The University celebrates what it does in events like the one that draws us here today. Institutions that forgo formal ceremonies surrender an insight into understanding who they are and what they are supposed to be doing. The University takes as much pleasure, perhaps more, in honoring than the honorees do in receiving. Secretly, we hope they really appreciate what happened to them at the University. If they do, it gives credence to the mission and responsibility I have been talking about. After all, you the alumni (who you are, what you accomplish, what you feel) are the real measures of our success or failures. We are really in your corner because if you succeed we feel successful.

In closing, I suggest to you that an alma mater gives a person the opportunity for a special association. There are milestones in each life. Your college and graduate education are among them. A new chance, increased knowledge and understanding, sometimes new relationships that affect your life, and often an experience that allows you to seize an opportunity takes place at your University. To keep ties to your University provides commitment beyond self, commitment to a place where others for generations may find what you did. Sometimes alma maters claim the greatest loyalty to all but family. When you identify for others your University, you can be proud of it even though it will be a few years before its name rings as familiarly as Harvard's. You took the chance on a new growing University. I'm sure you don't regret it. All of us - Alumni, faculty, staff, and retirees - can take satisfaction in what was and is being built here. It's new, it's good, and it's getting better.