

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

**Dear Colleagues,**

In September 2018, the *New York Times* ran an article "[To Restore Civil Society, Start With the Library.](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/opinion/sunday/civil-society-library.html)" The article, focused on public libraries, is relevant to the concept of a library in a liberal education institution, which is concerned with developing critically-thinking, future active citizens and leaders.

Libraries embody the concept of the commons in its most basic form – for the common good to be shared by all. They are part of the social structure of communities and campuses. They often bring intention to serving communities that are most vulnerable. In some ways, they have replaced the town square – they provide a space for community to be gathered, created, and honored. They provide access to resources, technology, services, and a human interaction element.

Libraries actively advocate and provide for people to have the ability to freely create, access, and share knowledge of cultural materials. This type of advocacy is a concept necessary for learning, innovation, and the perpetuation of cultural knowledge.

The underlying premise is that freedom of information and free access to information is critical to participate in education. Continued use and access to information in broader society is described by the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Challenge as "essential for success in a global economy and for informed citizenship."

Libraries also have long history of supporting social equity through freedom of information and free access since the early 20th Century. Equity of access to information and space to build community is critical in a society that seeks to promote independent thinking. Libraries are a point of access; we are a connector.

Libraries can provide infrastructure so groups can amplify their voice. They can be deliberate in going beyond sharing a diversity of points of view to sharing a diversity of voices. This is done through holistic design of spaces, library practices, development of collections, and programmatic outreach.

For an academic library such as Grand Valley State University's, partnerships and participatory engagement are at the heart of our identity. Applying an inclusion, equity, diversity, and accessibility lens means that we need to be conscious of the variety of needs and perspectives.

This process starts with our student

employees, who serve as the face of the University Libraries in so many ways. By valuing their lived experiences and skill, we can support their growth while learning from them. We engage with them to define our practices and strategies.

It continues through with our partner and community engagement opportunities. From partnering to collect and showcase collections from under-represented voices to using social media to connect with groups who traditionally have not used the Libraries, we are continually evolving our approaches and practices to create a third space, which supports the dismantling of barriers to access.

Annie Bélanger
Dean of University Libraries

To Restore Civil Society, Start
With the Library
[https://www.nytimes.com/
2018/09/08/opinion/sunday/
civil-society-library.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/opinion/sunday/civil-society-library.html)

More information on Liberal Education
and America's Promise Challenge
<https://www.aacu.org/leap>