**Welcoming remarks, CLAS Faculty and Staff Start-Up Meeting, 8.27.20**

I am so glad to have arrived at Grand Valley.

It’s been a journey—in not quite three months I’ve wrapped up my previous leadership position, sold and packed a home, driven 2,139 miles with three vehicles, a boat, a tool trailer, two dogs, one cat, my 17-year-old daughter, my husband, and my brother-in-law and nephew as co-pilots, and started setting up a new home. All amidst the pandemic, of course.

My family and I are looking forward to feeling settled soon…at least as settled as any of us can feel in these odd times. Our West Michigan wooded backyard is helping, as you can see.

And I am so glad to be here with you today.

I know how busy you all are, and how tired

After pivoting to remote teaching and working in the middle of an extraordinary winter semester, and after spending much if not all of this summer preparing for multiple possible modalities of teaching this fall, as well as creatively rethinking how Grand Valley operates in order to keep our offices, labs, studios, and other spaces and services open in support of students

The view keeps shifting as new data become available and as public health recommendations change, and as we traverse once-familiar terrain now shrouded in fog, which makes it hard to manage anxiety, to tamp down fear, to maintain patience, and to give grace.

And yet, we are resilient people, and we are a resilient community.

I’d like to spend a few minutes with you reflecting on the idea that our resilience owes much to our varied backgrounds in the liberal arts and sciences.

My first proposition is this:

* + The learning outcomes associated with a liberal arts and sciences education are essential for the lives we are living in the midst of global disruptions
  + That include a pandemic, climate change, and uprisings calling for racial equity and social justice
  + Because the learning outcomes associated with a liberal arts and sciences education equip people to navigate uncertainty
  + By preparing them to be lifelong learners who demonstrate adaptability, creativity and resilience.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities offers a useful and familiar summary of essential learning outcomes for a liberal arts and sciences education suggesting that students who study human cultures and societies, creative expression, and the physical and natural world and whose learning is focused by engagement with big question and by extensive practice delivered through real-world experiences will gain essential skills in

* + inquiry,
  + analysis,
  + critical and creative thinking,
  + written and oral communication,
  + quantitative and information literacy,
  + teamwork,
  + problem solving,
  + and integrative thought and action

These students will also develop a commitment to personal and social responsibility, expressed through

* + Civic engagement
  + Intercultural competence
  + And ethical reasoning and action.

In total, these essential learning outcomes lay the foundation for informed citizenship and lifelong learning.

I want to observe that focusing on the *learning outcomes* associated with a liberal arts and sciences education is to take a *student-centered* stance—to emphasize the knowledge, skills and abilities that students learn *through* the content delivered, rather than focusing on the content alone, by itself.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities put out a recent publication, “What Liberal Education Looks Like,” that offers inclusive excellence as another frame for understanding liberal arts and sciences learning outcomes: *and I quote*

* + “Liberal education is the form of education appropriate to democracy… The task of an education allied to democracy is not simply to help students gain knowledge and skills, but in so doing also to form the habits of heart and mind that liberate them and that equip them for, and dispose them to, civic involvement and the creation of a more just and inclusive society” (4).

This view of liberal education invokes Paulo Friere and other scholars of liberatory education who understand pedagogy as a *problem-posing* process in which knowledge is *constructed* by students and teachers in dialogue together in order to make and re-make themselves, their communities and the world an understanding of the educational process that feels particularly necessary now as well as relevant for Grand Valley’s mission to prepare students to have the *self-efficacy* to *“shape their lives, their professions and their societies.”*

It is important to note that Friere developed his theory and praxis as an *adult* educator—which serves as a reminder that adult students in particular—now more than ever, in the context of historic inequities, rising income inequality and mass unemployment—are *well-served* through access to a liberal arts and sciences education. Which, as convener of the Great Colleges for the New Majority network David Scobey argues, offers adult students—many of whom were not able to access college earlier in their lives—a way out of cycles of unemployment and “retraining” and towards more flexible, self-authored futures.

I have been suggesting that the learning outcomes associated with a liberal arts and sciences education can be understood as representing the value of that education, because these learning outcomes equip students to be adaptive, creative, resilient lifelong learners.

In *Robot Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Joseph Aoun puts a finer point on this argument:

“The view that mastery of facts and knowledge is what makes a person ‘smart’ or ‘prepared’ is a lopsided view of human intelligence—and never more so than in the present moment, when robots, advanced machines and AI are increasingly able to master facts and knowledge as effectively as the ‘smartest’ of us” (1120 on Kindle).

To remain robot-proof in a digital world, Aoun proposes that people need to develop three literacies—data literacy, technology literacy and human literacy as well as four cognitive capacities—critical thinking, systems thinking, entrepreneurship and cultural agility to which I will add a fifth: namely, *resilience*.

Aoun argues that teaching these new literacies and cognitive capacities requires learning across disciplines, project-based learning, and real-world connections and he goes on to invoke John Dewey, noting that experiential learning—putting theory into practice in real-life situations over time—results in deeper learning, the expanded creativity and mental flexibility that Aoun calls “far transfer” (1707 Kindle).

Note also Aoun’s alignment with the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ essential learning outcomes, and the shared acknowledgement of the role of high-impact practices in achieving them.

If I had time, I would talk about some of David Staley’s alternative university thought experiments and Cathy Davidson’s discussion of the new education because one of my goals for us as a learning community is this: to engage the work of influential thinkers who are trained in the liberal arts and sciences, remain deeply committed to liberal education, and see liberal education as a foundational asset on which to build higher education’s future.

This is the foundation on which the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Grand Valley can build to support the institution in fulfilling its mission.

Which leads me to my second proposition:

* + *All of us who are committed to offering an equitable, inclusive, high-quality public liberal arts and sciences education should come together as the adaptable, creative and resilient lifelong learners that* ***we*** *are*
  + *In order to serve students in new ways and to fulfill our institutional mission in this emerging and challenging context.*

This year we will be modeling resilience for our students, and for each other.

We will also be co-creating a vision that builds on the strengths, assets and values of CLAS units and the College as a whole.

I’ve spent much of my first two weeks on the job with small groups of CLAS unit heads engaging in lively conversations about liberal arts and sciences education and the state of the CLAS union.

As a new member of the Grand Valley community, I am especially interested in listening to what each of you has to say about your work, about our collective work, about the community that we make together.

I have much to learn from your knowledge and wisdom and experience. The diversity of people and perspectives in CLAS is one of our greatest assets.

As food for thought as we launch this year, I’d like to offer a working list of questions we could explore together in order to design the right set of strategies, priorities, goals and tactics for CLAS planning, which will operate in alignment with the University’s strategic planning process. These questions include:

* + What should an inclusive and equitable public liberal arts and sciences education be and do?
  + What programs could we redesign or build to attract and support a wide range of learners, including FTIACs, transfers, adults, graduate students, and lifelong learners?
  + What curricula, credentials, and modes of delivery do today’s and tomorrow’s students seek?
  + What curricula, credentials, and modes of delivery do today’s and tomorrow’s “wicked problems” require?
  + What barriers to access and success exist for our students—what disparities still exist—and how might we remove them?
  + How do we ensure that *all* students have access to the new literacies, cognitive capacities, deep experiential learning opportunities, and high-impact practices that we know support student success?
  + How might we deepen and extend CLAS collaborations across College units, the campus, the region and the state to fully and authentically link the liberal arts and sciences to professional preparation and workforce needs?
  + How do we support *all* faculty to achieve excellence and experience satisfaction in their teaching, scholarly/creative work, service, and leadership, and support *all* staff to achieve excellence and experience satisfaction in their varied forms of work, service, and leadership, so that *all of us* might find balance between our professional and personal lives?
  + What processes and structures might we deploy, redesign and/or build to support our work together?

These questions indicate the value that I place on equity and inclusion, student-centered decision-making, faculty and staff development and support, innovative and forward-thinking approaches to liberal arts and sciences education, community engagement, and work/life balance.

I also value inclusive decision-making, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaborating, and proactive planning (what I call conversation towards action).

As your dean, these values will shape how I lead and facilitate our work together.

I’d like to structure the rest of our time together as a dialogue—I’m interested in beginning a conversation, listening to your thoughts and questions, and hearing your best advice as I deepen my acquaintance with you, Grand Valley, Grand Rapids, and West Michigan.

Thank you, and welcome to the new academic year!