

From the President's Desk: Let Us Choose Opportunity

By David Roland Finley, Ph.D., North Central Michigan College

Things are not always as they seem. As a college president, I am often dressed in a suit and tie, but this has not always been the case. Allow me to explain by starting at the 'beginning,' with a story about my grandparents. Only one of my grandparents earned a high school education. These four individuals lived in rural communities in the Midwest. Consequently, such coursework was not a priority. There was no need for this 'book learning' to work back on the farm. What's more, young women were not encouraged to progress beyond the eighth grade. This makes it all the more remarkable that my maternal grandmother, who received only six years of formal schooling, ran the family farm! Grandma K skipped a grade ahead twice during her studies to secure an eighth grade education.

A generation later my parents took a significant step forward by both graduating from high school. By the 1960s in the United States, this had become the expectation. However, neither attended college. A high school education was sufficient to garner reputable employment off the farm.

My father worked first in factories, then at the local lumberyard, and finally as a truck driver for the county road commission. My mother was a nanny and housekeeper, a study hall/library aide, and eventually the high school principal's secretary—her dream job. We lived modestly as I grew up. There was certainly enough, but few extravagances. In retrospect, I now see my youth as an idyllic childhood, playing in the woods of rural southern Michigan when not in school. Moreover, there was always the expectation that I would go to college, which was not true for many of my classmates. My parents saw this as the path to a well-paying job. Four years of higher education would lead to the American Dream.

As I now reflect, it is remarkable that both my younger brother and I graduated from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In fact, we both earned Master's degrees from this institution, he in civil engineering and I in atmospheric science. The 1980s were an era when hardworking students of modest means could afford to attend college via summer earnings and the help of federal and state grants.

Nevertheless, times were tough in the early 1980s. Unemployment and interest rates remained high and a summer job proved elusive following my senior year of high school. Looking out for my best interests, one set of grandparents hired me to hoe corn out of bean fields for a portion of the summer at a penny a cornstalk. I also worked baling hay for several area farmers whenever I could. Finally, I sorted tomatoes for a three-week stretch in August on what I was certain was an antique harvesting machine. In each case, laboring as a farmhand in 80-degree Fahrenheit heat honed my work ethic.

A year later, I was fortunate to secure a steady summer job. Economic times had improved, and I was able to work at the local hot dog manufacturing plant for \$7.50/hour. In addition, there was extensive overtime prior to the three summer holidays—Memorial Weekend, 4th of July, and Labor Day. During the next two summers, I worked in the lunchmeat distribution warehouse of the same facility. I recall one stretch where I worked three different shifts over three consecutive weeks. It was brutal! While friends headed to the beach, I was dressing in long johns and a winter coat for eight or more hours of manual labor, pulling orders of lunchmeat for shipment to warehouses throughout the Midwest. Even with the obvious drawbacks for a young man, this experience provided tremendous opportunity, further honed my work ethic, and crystallized the value of higher education to fulfill my dreams.

Fast forward to today... I can now say that I have stood on the Great Wall of China, viewed dinosaur bones in Patagonia, and skied in the Austrian Alps. My aim is to visit all seven continents. More importantly, I have served as a graduate researcher, professor, and administrator at higher education institutions throughout Michigan and Indiana. These jobs would have been out of reach without my post-secondary education. In these roles, I have enabled subsequent generations of women and men to pursue their dreams and better their lives. By attending college, I have paid more taxes, been able to give back via service organizations, and enabled the institutions where I've worked to thrive.

The path to career success for a close high school friend was different. He chose to earn an associate's degree in drafting. This knowledge and an entrepreneurial spirit laid the groundwork to launch his construction company. In both our cases, higher education provided the key to a brighter future. Such opportunities are increasingly important in today's 'college economy,' where two-thirds of jobs that pay a livable wage require a post-secondary education.

By chance, I recently visited my hometown on the same weekend as the fundraiser for the local 4-H Club. As a guest of my parents, I attended this Spaghetti Dinner. Coincidentally, this event was held in the elementary school cafeteria where I ate as a child. Scanning the room, I could see myself in several of the youth present. They were full of aspirations and of modest means. Perhaps their parents would support the notion of obtaining a higher education. Perhaps they would not. In either case, I asked myself, "What prospects exist for these young people to follow their dreams in today's world?" How might they come to earn a college degree or certificate?

In many ways, Michigan's Tip of the Mitt is no different from rural southern Michigan. In fact, the socioeconomic variances may be even more extreme. A recent Frey Foundation report described this area as 'Poverty in Paradise.' The report poignantly states:

On the shores of two Great Lakes, two Michigans are pulling away from one another. For one, graceful summer homes rise on waterfronts, equipped with boats, tubes and toys. For the other, life is lived in trailers on back roads, or small houses tucked into the woods. One comes north in May and enjoys a summer of festivals, fun and restaurant dining. The other Michigan lives here year-round and waits tables or changes hotel beds. One is, like the state at large, recovering from the recession and building wealth. The other slips deeper into, or closer to, poverty.

Given this growing socioeconomic divide—and the crippling effects of student loan debt—consider the opportunity and responsibility that North Central Michigan College bears. It is vital that we continue to offer exceptional, accessible, and relevant higher education to the students we serve.

Choosing this path will provide benefits, not only to the individual, but also to our host communities. Vibrant local communities, with an educated populous, make for a robust State of Michigan. This, in turn, strengthens our Nation. Such a plan is simply good sense. Let us choose to provide opportunity.