Good afternoon.

So, I was reading an article in Forbes this weekend…. Oh my, I’m here talking at the 25th Anniversary of the Program on Intergroup Relations. A social justice think-tank, a hotbed if you will, and the first thing I mention is Forbes magazine?

The article was on creative leadership… in the military… am I digging the social justice hole deeper?

Let me plunge on – the article outlined six principles of creative military leadership. These included:
- Role modeling behavior and integrity
- Processing information systematically
- Practicing discipline
- Appreciating generalists
- Appreciating and engaging diversity
- Exercising decision making based on values

These principles are striking to me.

About a hundred years ago, when I became an associate dean, Connie Cook gave me a book by Tina Gunsalus called The College Administrator’s Survival Guide. In this book Gunsalus writes about the importance of knowing who you are, knowing what’s important to you, knowing how your values align, or don’t align, with the values of the organization in which you work, and she writes about the importance of making decisions in the face of imperfect information by bringing in multiple perspectives, ensuring that stakeholders have the opportunity to be heard, and, in the end, processing all of this contradictory information through the filter of personal values to reach a decision.

These principles are striking to me.

Harry Kraemer is a professor of business at Northwestern. In his book, From Values to Action: The Four Principles of Values-Based Leadership, he talks about the importance of self-reflection to identify your own values, and to know what really matters to you; he talks about true self confidence as the acceptance of self – accepting who you are with
strengths and weaknesses and most importantly with the ability to improve; he talks about the ability to hear and see multiple perspectives and to balance them; and he talks about humility.

Military leadership, business leadership, academic leadership...

The commonality of these principles are striking to me.

For what has been the legacy of the Program on Intergroup Relations if not the creation of curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students, faculty and staff at the University of Michigan to come to understand their own identities, their own values? And through this foundation of self-understanding, to come to appreciate diversity and difference? And through this to develop the humility to appreciate and value others, their rights, their aspirations, their capabilities and their opportunities for growth?

This is remarkable and important work within IGR, and I believe it parallels a theme that runs through much of what is happening at the University of Michigan today.

It is work that requires, demands, the social space created by physical co-location and close interactions between diverse human beings. The deep communication required to truly understand another does not happen through mediated systems – our means of communication as physical beings is not virtual. We are physical beings, after all. We all have physical bodies. Or did I miss a memo?

We speak, we listen, we touch, we see, we see even that which we were not meant to see. We hear even that which we were not meant to hear.

In our digital age we have amazing abilities to share information, and we have an amazing ability to reach across distances. But these digital tools do not replace the unmediated experience of close human contact. Mediated experiences are, by definition, incomplete. It is true that we can do much through our digital devices – I enjoy texting my friends as much as the next vice-provost – but we must recognize that much of our understanding comes from the unexpected, the unscripted, the unanticipated.

It is an interesting irony that the companies that seek to sell us digitally mediated social connections, and digitally mediated education are largely co-located with the venture capital firms who fund them. The investors who support Google, and Udacity, and all those other internet companies, insist on being able to easily visit and communicate in person with those in whom they invest. They all want to have lunch together. They all occupy the same space in Palo Alto.

Those who are developing online educational programs and material are investing in a banking approach to education, wherein the student is an empty account into which facts and knowledge are deposited. This misconstrues the true purposes of education, for education is what remains after you have forgotten all that you learned. That remainder represents the practices, the habits of thought, the power to process new and unexpected information through the filter of your values, and the ability to act on the conclusions.

As we look towards the future at the University of Michigan we see engaged learning as core to our work. By engaged learning I mean experiential, action based learning. The kind of learning that requires physical contact with clients and stakeholders, the kind of learning that requires the unscripted, unexpected surprises of the real world.
And what capacities do we want our students to develop in order to create not just their own success, but also to support success for all of human society? Of course they must learn the skills of quantitative and qualitative reasoning, critique, and an understanding of human ascetics and expression in all its forms. But they must also learn those skills of leadership, founded in values, and best learned through experiences.

1. Our students must learn to understand and grow their own creative process. They must come to recognize creativity not as a fixed capability that some have, and others do not, but rather to recognize creativity as an innately human gift that each of us can develop.

2. Our students must learn also how to look into the world, and to see where they can bring value to others. Our students must learn to view others, and the communities in which they work, through an understanding of capacities and opportunities. They must see not what others lack, but what they can do. What are their capacities? What are their opportunities? And they must develop the toolset to make real the products, organizations, infrastructure, networks, or systems that will deliver on that opportunity. In doing this they must recognize their own potential, and their own limits, as change agents. They must learn to gather allies and resources, to overcome barriers, to be persistent, and they must learn to deal with, and grow from, failure.

3. Our students must practice working with complexity, and making decisions in face of uncertain information. They must develop the tools to consider and weigh the social and environmental consequences of any action, and yet to act even in the face of uncertainty about what these consequences might be.

4. To be successful in the 21st century our students must build the foundation for understanding others, they must be keen observers of difference across cultures, across racial boundaries, across value systems. And they must be able to work across these differences, both as an individual and in teams. They must indeed become champions of teamwork – they must do more than tolerate diversity, but learn to embrace the power that a diversity of experiences, values, and thoughts can bring to any task.

In all of this work – developing their creative process, developing the entrepreneurial mindset of a change maker, understanding communities and working across cultures, and developing the foundation for action in the face of uncertainty, our students must become true communicators. They must become excellent listeners, moving beyond passive listening to become active listeners working within a context. They must learn to observe, as an ethnographer or anthropologist might, all that they see, hear, taste, and touch, and build these observations into constantly adapting frameworks for understanding, frameworks for working with and influencing others, and for being influenced in return.

I see this all as core emerging thread of our educational enterprise at the University of Michigan.

Let me end with a quote: “knowledge about social diversity is essential to becoming responsible global citizens. The need for understanding between and across cultures is crucial to the development of students. We teach and learn about social group identity, social relations, intercultural communication, and social justice.”
These seem to me to be important elements of the core educational thread that I just described.

And this quote was from Kelly Maxwell and Monita Thompson, the Co-Directors of the IGR program.

Thanks for coming to this 25th anniversary symposium for the Program on Intergroup Relations. I know you will find the day exciting and interesting, and I know it will renew your spirit.

Thanks.