

WIL Highlights for February 21, 2020

“Educating the Next Generation of Leaders: Women Presidents Share their Vision” featuring Dr. Philomena Mantella, President of Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, MI and Leocadia Zak, President of Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA



Summary: For WIL #201, a “fireside chat” format provided a perfect opportunity to learn from two outstanding leaders in higher education, both representing the liberal arts. President Zak is the 9th president of Agnes Scott, a private women’s college with approximately 1,000 students while President Mantella is the 5th president and first female president of Grand Valley State University, a public university with over 25,000 students. Although their career paths are distinctly different and they serve student populations in different parts of the country, both presidents share many inspiring similarities.

The two leaders think and lead from a strategic, innovative and entrepreneurial mindset. They are strong advocates of lifelong learning; support inclusion and diversity in all aspects; are strong communicators and listeners; appreciate generational differences and perspectives; value the relationship with business and the community; and strive to balance very challenging and often competing priorities across multiple constituencies and varied sources. And, all the while, they work to implement a compelling vision for the future.

As each president shared her own career, leadership and life lessons, the attendees were completely engaged. Particularly impressive were examples of current opportunities for liberal arts students including more experiential learning, internships, and co-op experiences as well as leadership development and global travels and study programs. Agnes Scott’s SUMMIT program and GVSU’s REACH HIGHER TOGETHER vision are not only innovative strategies but they are expanding the impact of higher education now and for the future.

Background – Personal & Professional:

- **President Mantella** (Philly to her family and friends) grew up in upstate NY and MI; obtained a Bachelor's and Master's degree in social work at Syracuse University and a Ph.D. in college and university administration from Michigan State. Always Interested in organizational complexity and systemic change.
- 30+ years in higher education in virtually every facet of administration. Prior to coming to GVSU in July 2019, she served in roles from Assistant Dean for Enrollment at Ferris State all the way to SVP and CEO of Northeastern University's Lifelong Learning Network. Philly is acknowledged as one of higher education's leading entrepreneurs and change agents.
- Married to an attorney, has 3 sons and 4 grandchildren. Philly is the sister of TLG's president, Tino Mantella. Her big brother was her hero growing up.
- **President Zak** (Lee to her family and friends) grew up in Lynn, MA and her mother, a nurse, was a major role model in her life. For college she chose Mount Holyoke, a women's liberal arts college in South Hadley, MA. After receiving her bachelor's degree, she went on to receive her J.D. from Northeastern University School of Law.
- Career path included being a partner in a Washington D.C. and Boston based law firm, practicing in the areas of corporate, municipal and international finance; Adjunct Professor of Law; and for 8 years prior to taking her role at ASC in July, 2018, she was Director of the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, approved by the Senate in the Obama administration.
- Married to an attorney, Lee has embraced the college and the metro area; recently named "one of ATL's most influential leaders" and on the cover of the Atlanta Magazine.

Key Insights & Reflections from the Presidents:

- **(Mantella)** "My goal is to make learning more available, become a model of inclusion and inclusive prosperity. We shouldn't take pride in how many we exclude in our admissions. Most rewarding experience in my higher education career path is having a transformational impact on first generation / diverse students and knowing it has a ripple effect. I chose to apply for the presidency of GVSU because I saw what I call 'systemic support.' I saw a change mindset, an agility for growth and the capacity to be what's necessary over the next decade. I also believe we can be an inclusive community asset. Not only is our city the second most philanthropic in the country, 60% of the GVSU faculty and staff give to support the university!
- **(Zak)** "My career as an attorney and then directing the USTDA were terrific opportunities to make a difference. But the opportunity to be a part of educating young women as leaders and SUMMIT are what most attracted me to Agnes Scott. Currently the college is ranked #1 Most Innovative, #1 First Year Experience, and #2 in Social Mobility. We also have several distinctive new graduate and certificate programs and now we're ready to add SCALE, a second year signature experience with even more experiential learning. But most of all, our students inspire me every day – their courage, kindness and brilliance. Many are first generation and 40% qualify for Pell grants."

- **(Mantella)** “Students shouldn’t have to choose between broad liberal arts education as a foundation and a professional education. People have 18 jobs but we make students at age 20 choose a major, go deep in one field. Should have a broad base and then multiple certificates, digital badges across a career that allow them to keep learning and add professional skills.”
- **(Zak)** “Our focus is on successful experiences for students when they’re on campus and when they leave. Our students – no matter their background – will be able to break out of the mold and it’s what they do with their education that matters. Of course there’s the continuing debate about liberal arts versus the university. Liberal arts students may start out as baristas, but where they end up is likely running the company. So we need to bridge the gap, make it faster to get from the starting point to the end game.”
- **(Mantella)** “My vision is to make the institution strong for our successors; an intergenerational enterprise; see it as a moral obligation. Going forward I believe we need to measure higher education against ‘lifetime value.’ And for GVSU, I want it to be the most significant economic engine in our state.”

Take-aways / Comments from Attendees:

- “Education should not be a model of exclusion. Build and design for inclusive prosperity.”
- “Higher education can make you successful but self-education has lifetime value.”
- “Be a self-directed learner and always look for opportunities for change.”
- “Leadership, it’s all about leadership. Develop that mentality.”
- “Work intently and to understand the culture and the needs of those you support.”
- “Get to the essence of what matters.”
- “Innovation is key no matter the field or organization. Increase your talent.”
- “Value of innovation and importance in higher educations.”
- “Focus on the long game. Inspiring a large group or organization is like navigating a boat. The larger the vessel the longer it takes to change course.”
- “Focus on experiential & global learning for next generation.”
- “Next 20 years 1/3 of jobs will be gone; 1/3 will change; 1/3 will be new.”
- “Impressed with Lee Zak’s career transitions.”
- “Important to have strong thought partners in your network.”
- “Important to listen ... and to take action.”

- "Lead with inspiration, not fear."

- "Never think you're done learning."

- "Need to create space for conversation and come away with learning. Stay open minded to new ideas."

- "Link your journey to the leaders who are committed to your development."

- "All leaders should feel like they have a place at the table with confidence and put up a flag when communication is needed."

- "Tips on working with millennial generation – sense of fairness."