

Interview of Mary Kramer, Grand Valley State University Board of Trustees (2013-2020)

A conversation with Mary Kramer and Jim Goenner

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Jim Goenner ([00:05](#)):

Well, it's a great honor to be here. It's actually August 11th, 2020, and we are with Mary Kramer, the outgoing chair of Grand Valley State University's Board of Trustees. Mary, welcome.

Mary Kramer ([00:17](#)):

Thank you very much. Good to be here.

Jim Goenner ([00:19](#)):

And not only are you the of the board, but didn't you start at Grand Valley as a student?

Mary Kramer ([00:23](#)):

I actually started at U of M, University of Michigan, until I ran out of money and reluctantly went home after my freshman year. And I've told lots of people the story that it was the best thing that I'd ever done, because the same things that set Grand Valley apart today: small class sizes, focus on students was true then. Then it was 7,000 students, today it's 25,000 and the same values are maintained.

Jim Goenner ([00:52](#)):

It's amazing. And you actually have played a role in Grand Valley's leadership. You chaired the search committee for that...

Mary Kramer ([01:00](#)):

I did not chair it, but I was a member of it. Yes, John Kennedy, who was at that time, the chair of the board chaired the search committee. I was vice chair. So by the time we had selected a new president, I was sliding in as new chair.

Jim Goenner:

And tell us about the new president.

Mary Kramer:

Philomena Mantella is exactly the right president for Grand Valley at this point in time. We've been very fortunate to have a continuity of leadership. There have only been five presidents and the institution is still relatively young. The new president, we were looking for someone who would embrace what's so terrific about Grand Valley. What's so remarkable. The student's success, the focus across the board, every person who works at Grand Valley, whether it's someone in the plant department, facilities, in the dorms, in food service, they all, or faculty, of course, they all embrace this they're there for students. And so we wanted someone who wanted to focus on that, not be a research institution, that's not what we are, but also build on it because higher education is changing. I mean hardly a week goes by where you're not seeing some new relationship. Arizona State is buying such and such and they're going online or you're watching what Mitch Daniels has done at Purdue. You know, you're just watching all this. The landscape is changing and her expertise was building a global campus at Northeastern University. So we have the mixture of forward thinking, how do we deliver education and to whom, as well as the focus on what we do so well now. So we have a foundation, now where else can we go?

Jim Goenner ([02:50](#)):

Well, I started at Grand Valley in 1987 and it was Grand Valley State College. And now it's Grand Valley State University. And I tell my own daughter, who's now a junior there, that I was one of the first to take a downtown Grand Rapids class at the Eberhard Center. And here we are today in Detroit at a Grand Valley State University facility. What's it been like to see your alma mater grow and prosper across the state?

Mary Kramer ([03:17](#)):

Well, not only is it my alma mater, but I actually covered Grand Valley when I was a reporter at the Grand Rapids Press. So I remember the first land purchase that built that Eberhard Center and then how it built from there. And I think that if you look around the country right now, the universities that are thriving have a downtown, have a urban base. And I think that that's what students want. Now I'm talking all pre-COVID because some of this may be changing now, but you certainly see Penn, University of Pennsylvania and what they have done in their base and they've become an economic force. I think Grand Valley is as well in downtown Grand Rapids on the west side of the river that divides kind of the city. So I think not only is it something that helps the economy, which is what the founding boosters of Grand Valley, they wanted a four year university in the Grand Rapids area because they saw it as part of their economic formula that they had to have that for talent. And now they're seeing how it can also be a catalyst for development and if you've watched what's happened on the west side of Grand Rapids, I think Grand Valley has been a part of the residential and the commercial redevelopment of those neighborhoods.

Jim Goenner ([04:40](#)):

It's breathtaking to go downtown and see what's prospered. I want to transition a bit for the National Charter Schools Founders Library and one of the things that you've done is you were a gubernatorial appointee to the board. Can you tell us about that process?

Mary Kramer ([04:54](#)):

Well, I can tell you that I was first nominated by a Democrat Governor Granholm. I was one of a group of nominees that she put before the state Senate, but politics being politics, she was a lame duck and the Senate wouldn't ratify her choices. Flash forward to Rick Snyder becoming governor as a Republican. I'm a political independent, I can't even write a check to a political candidate because of the conflict with my job as a group publisher at Crain. So I was an alum. Some people I knew were in the governor's office.

Someone reached out; maybe I was still in a file somewhere from a past nomination. But I was asked if I would like to serve, I talked to the governor about it and how honored I would be to go back to Grand Valley and be able to contribute in a different way. And I made it clear, I can't make any political contributions. And he said, I wouldn't expect it. And that was way it was, that's how I became appointed.

Jim Goenner ([05:59](#)):

The way it's supposed to work. Well, very good. So you've talked about leaning in, you certainly came on to the board of a major university. It's now the largest university, as far as a charter school authorizing in Michigan and you leaned in on the quality topic. Can you tell us about that and what motivated you to do that?

Mary Kramer ([06:21](#)):

Well, because I had two things, I had maybe three things. I had been an education reporter and I follow education keenly, and certainly having been a resident of the city of Detroit and working and living in the city of Detroit since 1989, I had watched all the different school reform things that have been happening in Detroit. I certainly supported school choice and charter schools because the Detroit Public Schools at the time were not delivering what they could or should have been. There's a lot of politics. There's a lot of history there. That's not a reflection on Dr. Vitti, who's running the traditional public school district now. I have the highest regard for him. I'm talking 1990-1991 and Skillman Foundation and some business leaders got behind charter schools in the city of Detroit. And I thought school choice was really important. Then later, as the years went by, I became a member of the board of the Skillman Foundation, which is focused on children in the city of Detroit and the more I looked at what was happening I saw that for better or worse, there were areas of the city of Detroit that were highly competitive for charters. That one charter was successful or got good enrollment and another charter would come in. Meanwhile there was another public school down the street. So there was a lot of resources concentrated in certain areas of the city and not so much in other areas. So that was one concern I had. The other concern on the quality was when you look at the performance and the test scores and other measures of success, I really think that Grand Valley and other charter authorizers should set the bar higher than to be marginally better than the crappy traditional public school in that neighborhood or in that area. It's not enough to be marginally better. We're Grand Valley. We have a school of education. We have resources that we use to support the charter schools in our network. We should be aiming hiring, helping the schools get to that higher level. So they are in fact, a school of choice for parents.

Jim Goenner ([08:41](#)):

It's beautiful, right? That's that passionate pursuit of excellence. So one of the things that's really been a hallmark of Grand Valley and relates to Detroit is Bob Thompson and the Thompson Foundation. Can you talk to us about what's transpired and where that's evolved?

Mary Kramer ([08:56](#)):

Bob Thompson and his wife Ellen are remarkable people. And I'm very proud that Crain's Detroit Business broke the story way back when he sold his paving company, and that's where the money came for the foundation, but what he did was he made millionaires out of the people who worked for him. And then he took money, put it in a foundation, and focused on education and he and his wife have done different things, but certainly the Thompson Scholarship for Working Families is one of the biggest, so there's a scholarship program at Grand Valley and other institutions that focus on working families. So not the lowest income need, but working families and need. So that's one thing that he's doing on

the higher ed level. And then of course in Detroit, this was an amazing story that he offered a hundred million dollars to the city school system for new high schools, but there were some conditions he wanted some attendance rules, 90% attendance, 90% go on to college. You know, he had certain things in mind...

Jim Goenner:
90-90-90...

Mary Kramer ([10:07](#)):

Right. And so that was not acceptable to the Detroit schools at that time. Now that's pre-Vitti I want to keep emphasizing, that was many years ago. So he built his own charter school network or acquired other independent charters that are now part of the Thompson school network. And I think it's remarkable what he's done. And for Grand Valley to have such a great relationship with him, our charter schools office is very supportive of all the schools in our charter network, but it has been enormously helpful for the Thompsons and the Thompson Foundation to fund scholarships at Grand Valley for some of the graduates of those schools.

Jim Goenner ([10:56](#)):

So I can imagine being on a university board and Grand Valley is now what the fourth largest university in Michigan by student enrollment.

Mary Kramer ([11:03](#)):

Well, knock on wood. We'll see what happens with this fall with COVID.

Jim Goenner ([11:07](#)):

So one question that I would assume comes up is why are we involved in K-12 as an authorizer? How has your board addressed that question? And how does that relate to the connection now that you have between university prep academies? And as I understand, there's a story that says the university board often brings students to board meetings and you as to why aren't you at Grand Valley? And there were some that said, well, because I went to a school you're chartered...

Mary Kramer ([11:35](#)):

That's true. We have students who come to the board meetings frequently, and we have heard that more than once. I think that when the comment was made by one of our trustees, David Hooker, when we were having a conversation about charters he said, do you realize we have more student lives in our charter schools than we have students on any of our campuses combined? And so that kind of sunk in people had never really thought of it before David Hooker is a former chair of the board. And so he was chair while I was on the board. And I thought that was a terrific observation. And it really flipped the script in terms of how trustees, I think that helped create the special charter school committee that now has two trustees, two members of the board of trustees of Grand Valley, as well as other individuals.

Jim Goenner ([12:38](#)):

I actually had the privilege of serving on that committee and it's been just outstanding conversations. And what I love is how you push in a constructive way, but always with that eye for quality, are we doing the right things for the students, for the communities? How is it impacting? And that's part of Grand Valley's mission as well, right? As a statewide university?

Mary Kramer ([12:59](#)):

Yes. I think that's true. And I think that pushing for that quality and saying, you know, let's not do seven years. Let's think about this. Let's give that school, all the support it needs, but let's make this three years or five years because we don't want to send the message that, you know, we can revoke a charter at any time, but we want to make sure that people are aspiring and working towards that goal of higher quality. So I think that's really important. The other thing, when you were asking about the different attributes that different trustees bring to the board, Sue Jandernoa is the other trustee who is on the charter school committee and she was a natural, because she's a former teacher and she and her husband, Mike, are very engaged in education issues and nonprofits in the Grand Rapids area. And so she was the perfect person because she is one of those people who asks a lot of tough questions.

Jim Goenner ([14:01](#)):

Yes. Sometimes it's the questions you ask as a board member that are so influential. One of the things I wanted to talk about is just put that in perspective. Grand Valley's charter schools now serve about 35,000 students and the university itself serving college students is about 25,000. So this little thing called charter schools, this experiment, this innovation, now has grown to what you said the trustees said we actually have more kids through the charters than we do through the university. But there's also been these conversations you'd know, as a reporter, of how do we better connect K-12 and higher ed? And it seems like through your charter school work, you've been doing some of that. Can you speak to any of those initiatives?

Mary Kramer ([14:44](#)):

Well actually, I'm not as familiar with those initiatives as I should be, but I can say more broadly connecting K-12 with higher ed, I think that over the last few years you've seen the shift that it's not just K-12, it's K-14 or it's K-16, or, you know, they use those phrases. And I think that there's also more... A lot of students are earning credits. Now I took advanced placement back in the stone age. I took advanced placement classes so I could opt out of a couple of courses my first year as a freshman. There's more of that now. And oh, the dual enrollment is huge. And I think that parents like it, because that means their tuition bill is going to be lower and students like it because they're more challenged at the high school because, let's face it senior year for a lot of students because they've already done the tests, they applied, so that last little bit of college, I mean, high school is sometimes like, you know, what elective can I take? You know, that kind of thing. So this is really a win-win for everyone.

Jim Goenner ([15:57](#)):

Yeah. That's amazing. I want to shift to the governance for a minute. So as a state university board, you were appointed by the governor. As a charter school authorizer, the Grand Valley board appoints the board members that govern the charter public schools, and they come to you after going through a process. But can you talk about what that is like, to appoint governing members of charter school boards and what type of responsibility do you see that?

Mary Kramer ([16:25](#)):

We look at who they are, whether they're employed, where they're employed, is this a reappointment? What was their attendance level like? What's the diversity on this board? What is the student body? What is the student population the school is serving? So for example, if a school is serving a largely Hispanic population, you would want to see a board that reflects that community, at least in some demographic way. So those are the kinds of things that we look at, and you've heard it at the board meeting, at the committee meetings. People will be asking questions like his or her attendance isn't very

good. And Rob usually he has a reason for that, like someone had cancer or someone, you know, had a health issue, but there's always an awareness and we ask the questions.

Jim Goenner ([17:23](#)):

So some of that accountability is directly placed on the board members because you're looking at those things and they all come back for either appointment originally or reappointment.

Mary Kramer ([17:33](#)):

Right. And I think that it is impressive to look at the credentials of the people on those boards. I was very surprised. I do know that the Detroit Regional Chamber, for example, at least in southeast Michigan, there may be a corollary in west Michigan, but they have kind of an academy sort of, you know, a training program or an orientation program for business people who would like to serve in that role. And it's not like they're getting Big 10 football tickets or something like that, this is could be a largely thankless job because, you know, parents might be calling you and complaining about this, that, and the other thing. But I think so to look at the credentials of the people willing to serve, I think it's pretty remarkable.

Jim Goenner ([18:17](#)):

Well, we always tell the board members that it's not a perk board. This is a working board, and yes, you're volunteering your time, but you are swearing your constitutional oath of office and with that comes a tremendous amount of responsibility, both for the taxpayers and the fiduciary responsibilities, but also for the students. Right, so that same focus on quality...

Mary Kramer ([18:35](#)):

Well, you've seen schools go bad, right? You've seen some, you kind of wonder where the board was on some of these things. There have been a couple of cases, not Grand Valley, thank God, but there've been a couple of news stories out of some schools that had sweetheart contracts or somebody was running the school and it looked like they were benefiting from it, you know, that kind of thing. And you kind of wonder where was that board?

Jim Goenner ([19:07](#)):

That's one of the great things about the charter system is that there is a system of checks and balances and that accountability, and that if a school is not performing, they actually can be closed. And that's a very difficult decision. It's one that would come to a university board. Did you ever face any of those closures in your tenure?

Mary Kramer ([19:25](#)):

Not since we've been on the... not that we actually, not since this committee was in place, but I know that that has occurred. And I think that is unfortunate but necessary because we do have a responsibility as authorizers. And I think that's something we should be proud of actually.

Jim Goenner ([19:49](#)):

As you know, I used to serve in that authorizing role. And I always said it was the worst day on the job when you had to close the school, but it was actually fulfilling the charter promise because the promise was you were going to do things for kids and take care of the taxpayer's money. And if you didn't, that privilege could be taken away. And it's a tough day when you have to do it, but it is necessary. I want to pivot just a minute. It seems like you have three big things, but you've been involved in so many, but you're the trustee of a state university, you're a trustee of the Skillman Foundation, which is an

influence maker and a funder, and then you're also in the media in communications and so you see the world from such a broad perspective. How has this charter idea played out in Detroit and what are the dynamics that have made it contentious and where do you see opportunities for unity?

Mary Kramer ([20:45](#)):

Well, I think there's two dynamics that have that have played out. One is the power of teacher unions. And I think that that has been a factor in the negative narrative about charters because it's competition and it's largely not unionized, so that's one thing. And then also when Dr. Vitti came to Detroit and he looked at the situation where he has about 50,000 students... when I came to Detroit in 1989, there were 200,000 students in the Detroit Public Schools. That was the size of the city of Grand Rapids' population. And by the time Dr. Vitti came to Detroit, there were 50,000, a little less maybe, students in the traditional public schools. 50,000 in charters, give or take. And 10- a few thousand, actually a considerable number, going outside the city of Detroit to school every day. Now the diminishment from 200,000 to a hundred thousand and change is partly population loss, but it was also a sign that the schools simply were not, when you think about the per pupil funding and the facilities that are involved in Detroit and the shrinking of the city and all those school buildings and where the money goes for, not just buildings, but also teacher pensions and all the benefits and all those things, it's kind of daunting. So people don't, there's a narrative that is anti-charter because it's "robbing" the traditional public schools of those resources. They're public schools, too. And what was so... there's a narrative in Detroit that often is that they treat charter schools as something that's not public, but it is publicly funded and they are public schools. They're just a different kind of public school. And I just, I can't get over how, what I would call the professional protesters would like to make decisions for everybody else. So even though I, as a parent might want my child to attend that charter school, someone else is advocating, you shouldn't have the right to send your child to that charter school. That's a logic that I do not understand.

Jim Goenner ([23:23](#)):

I love Dr. Howard Fuller because he has a quip to that. And he says the great thing about choice is it works even if you choose not to use it, because you have it. So wonderful. I want to talk a little bit more about Skillman. I had the opportunity to work with Lou Glazer years ago with the Detroit high school initiative that Skillman helped fund. Obviously you would have been involved in that and seeing it from your work at Crain's. Any thoughts about the promise of that, how it's played out?

Mary Kramer ([23:55](#)):

Well, I think at that time, and I was on the United Way board at that time, too, when they were involved in it. The high school graduation rate in Detroit was abysmal and General Motors and other major companies and foundations wanted to do something to change that dynamic. They wanted to increase the graduation rate for public schools in the city of Detroit. And I think that a lot of things happened, Lou's experimentation, or his model, I believe it was in Ferndale first that there was a high school kind of accelerator partnership was used in Detroit. And it did make a difference. It did. And to me, it's not just it's the model and the money. And I can't tell you the numbers, but I know there were multiple point gains in the graduation rate. The other thing, even though Lou is an advocate for everyone should go to college, but I also felt that one of the things that came out of that whole initiative was an appreciation for career pathways that may or may not have a four-year possibly not even a two-year college degree. And so there were partnerships with the fire department, partnerships with police, partnerships with DTE that was looking for people who could trim trees and earn a really good wage. They rebuilt the Detroit Public School Voc Center for construction skills. Those things had gone by the wayside in the last 15-20 years. And part of it was money again, because those were shared times programs. So your high school, if you were at a base high school and you wanted to go half day at the voc center that student

aid state aid went to the voc center for half of you, plus the schools didn't want to lose that money. And when I heard that, I thought, who's talking about student success here? Who's talking about what's really good for students? And so I think that whole narrative has been changing in the last few years, but I think the high school graduation investment was part of the investment in change.

Jim Goenner ([26:22](#)):

I know one of the schools that was funded through that initiative was the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy. What was it like to see Jalen, a celebrity, a basketball star, you know ESPN, coming back to Detroit to start a school?

Mary Kramer ([26:36](#)):

His neighborhood even. I believe it's his neighborhood. He has spoken at Crane events before. I think he's remarkable, but it's interesting because he had the perfect intentions. He had the great, right intentions, but he had a couple of, you know, running a school ain't easy... and so I think that now he's on a different trajectory and it's a more successful trajectory. I know that Tonya Allen from the Skillman Foundation was on his board as were others, and I think the progress he's made from those initial one, two or three years, and now, and he hasn't given it up and those kids, some of them serve as interns. They get exposure to what his life is like at ESPN or other broadcast jobs that he has. I think it's really remarkable.

Jim Goenner ([27:31](#)):

It's amazing. You know, I would imagine it's kind of like being the rookie in the NBA, you got to figure out how the system works, get a couple lessons and then you build and accelerate and grow. I want to talk about another group of schools that have a little different flavor in the Grand Valley portfolio. And that's Sam Joseph and the Covenant schools that would have started out of Detroit and have grown. They're serving an alternative population, often, even a homeless population. Can you talk about what that's been to be an authorizer of schools that are serving a different set of students?

Mary Kramer ([28:02](#)):

One of the big regrets that I have is that we have our meetings, now virtually, but usually because there's people from all over the state at the meetings, the big regret that I have, and if I had any advice to authorizers, if they were going to have a committee like Grand Valley's, is to set aside a couple of days a year where you do a field trip. Covenant would be one of those schools that I would love to visit because I know we've... I've gone to Thompson schools in Detroit, but I mean actual, not a dog and pony show, not at all like that. I don't want like a PR blitz, but to actually connect with the schools and talk to students, we do that at Skillman and it's the most powerful things that we do are actually talking to the students in the schools that we support. And so Covenant would be great, because that's a great story, but I personally haven't visited one of those schools.

Jim Goenner ([29:01](#)):

Well, and there's a lot of schools to visit. 78 at the last count that Grand Valley charters. So wonderful. I want to go to some of the things that are maybe been a little more controversial over the years. So this notion of for-profit/non-profit has been one that's been in the news, you would have been watching as a journalist. You would have seen foundations that are influence-makers weighing in on how they feel about that, but then also you'd have seen it as a university trustee. Can you talk about that whole nonprofit/for-profit issue that's come into the charter realm?

Mary Kramer ([29:38](#)):

I'm talking personally and these are the things that I've advocated for at Grand Valley. It's like for-profit and non-profit hospitals. We have a system in Michigan, a tradition that most of the healthcare in hospitals is delivered through nonprofit hospital corporations. They're multi-billion-dollar organizations, but they are nonprofit at their heart. With a for-profit organization, I want to make sure that we're looking at the finances and that nothing, that the quality measures are there. I don't care if they're for profit, as long as they're delivering the quality measures. If I start, if I have the impression that they're cutting corners, or not investing in a way that another charter, same size, same population, same kind of demographic is having better results, then I'd really want to look at that. But I don't have a problem with something being for profit as long as they deliver.

Jim Goenner ([30:39](#)):

So it's really about performance at the end of the day. Very good. So then another issue that comes up a lot is this notion of virtual schools and online learning. And when charters came to be in Michigan, in the mid-90s, there really wasn't the internet in the way that we think of online virtual learning. It just wasn't possible then with the technology. Now today, the technology has advanced so much, the universities are doing online learning, certainly with COVID people are looking to technology, but can you talk about what it's been like to be an authorizer of schools doing virtual when they were really the innovators and where do you see that evolving in the future?

Mary Kramer ([31:21](#)):

Well, one of the big things and one of the aha moments that I had in the last six or eight months is, as we looked at a school to authorize, a virtual school by an operator that was doing other schools, was to learn that some of the growth in this area pre-COVID was from students who had been bullied. I had no idea, but that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? If you want safety and security for your child, and they're having a very bad experience in school, because kids can be... social media can be incredibly destructive. You can see why a parent would be attracted to a virtual model. Now that said, I'm watching all these things that are happening, particularly in urban areas where let's face it, there is a digital divide and kids are not in school and I feel like the answer for those kids may not be virtual all year long. They need that interaction. They need to be in a classroom. They need that structure. A lot of kids do, whether they're urban or suburban. And I'm hearing a lot, if you're listening to what parents are saying, who are urging the schools to go back into session, the traditional publics are more likely it sounds to me, like they're more likely to go virtual this fall and private and charters are looking at more hybrid or in-person. It's all about what does that student need? So I think having virtual is as long as they are probably better at the technology than anybody else, because everybody else just kind of it happened to them. But the virtual schools, they have the technology, they have the format down and we'll see how successful they are in this COVID environment as well.

Jim Goenner ([33:19](#)):

It's been fascinating because two of the biggest barriers to charter school growth since they were spawned years ago, was facilities and financing. We always called them the two F's and the virtual schools don't have that facility limitation, you know, finding a spot, acquiring the property or the building, doing the renovation, doing the zoning, doing the inspection codes and so they've been able to be larger schools by enlarge. So an average charter school may be 500 students, though we certainly have schools over a thousand, but some of the virtuals are now 3,000-3,500.

Mary Kramer ([33:54](#)):

Well, as those grow though, I would be looking at what the state funding formula is, because to me, it's as those schools grow, again this is a diversion of resources, so you have another district that those students may not have internet access, so they're not going to be in a virtual school, but that school system is losing enrollment overall and the state funding is the same for a virtual school as it is for a traditional public or a traditional charter that has the real estate and the facilities and the upkeep and the maintenance and all that. I'm not sure that that's going to be a fair equation.

Jim Goenner ([34:42](#)):

Well, you have such a broad perspective. I want to ask you, as you envision out the future, how do you think things are going to change and evolve?

Mary Kramer ([34:51](#)):

Well, how I hope they will change and evolve is to have more investment in what Detroit is doing this year with Connected Futures. And that was when students went home in March, if you were lucky enough to have internet access at home, you could keep up with school, but if you were not, you might, if you had a device. I know a guy on the west side, in the Brightmoor neighborhood, who increased the strength of the wireless signal for the church, and people were driving to the church with their kids, so they could access things. That's, there's gotta be a better way.

Jim Goenner ([35:38](#)):

There were schools actually fitting school buses with wireless and putting them out in strategic locations.

Mary Kramer ([35:42](#)):

Isn't that something, I mean, so thank goodness they pivoted, right? Because it would have been worse to have no access at all, but I think the digital divide is a big deal. And I think that it was underscored in March when students went home. So in Detroit, they raised money, they went to DTE Energy, General Motors, Skillman Foundation, Kellogg Foundation was a big funder. They raised money to buy tablets and internet access for 53,000 kids. So that's a game changer. And the next phase, what I understand would be to extend that to charter students. So I think that's really important for a city like Detroit, because otherwise these students are going to be so far behind. They are very good already on phones. But a phone is not the same as a tablet or access depends on what your wireless signal is.

Jim Goenner ([36:51](#)):

It's interesting because I've always thought of authorizers sitting at the intersection of a practice of the schools and the policy of the legislature. And you have an opportunity to inform and influence both because obviously lots of research says policy and practice don't connect very well. From your eight years on the board, being at this intersection of policy and practice, what would you recommend to the legislature in the future if they were to make the laws better for education and all kids, what are some of the top things they should focus on?

Mary Kramer ([37:26](#)):

Well, I think choice is very important, but I also think funding's very important and funding for higher ed for example, has been going down, it used to be 80% of the of the budget for a state institution and now it's like 20, maybe even less. So I think they have to figure out where the money comes from for education. And I think that a lot of school districts are struggling with what we just talked about, the facilities. If you've got all this real estate, do you need it all now? We've learned a lot. So I think right

now is an exciting time to be in education. And even though I'm going off the Grand Valley board at the end of the year, I'll be on the Skillman board. In fact, I think I'll be chairing next year. So it's an opportunity for me to keep engaged in these things and maybe even have a little bit more time to be more engaged.

Jim Goenner ([38:25](#)):

Well, you've been so kind with your time with us. Are there things that you'd like to just, you know, talk about the future, talk about the past, are there things you'd like to reminisce about or wish for?

Mary Kramer ([38:39](#)):

I think that lawmakers could do well if they actually did the kinds of in-person orientation, not orientations, but the in-person conversations with the students, whether they're in charter schools, traditional public, when you... I'll tell you the most emotional experience we had was a high school in Cody Rouge and we had a panel of students on one weekday morning, and there were six or eight students and we asked them questions, this was Skillman board members, about things that they, what they were most afraid of, what were their biggest issues? And they talked about the Murder Mac and I'm like Murder Mac? Oh, that's the McDonald's down the street where so many shootings had been. And then another young woman said that she was late for school habitually, because there had been rapes of girls going to the bus stop in the dark in the morning. And so she would skip that first bus and come in late. I never had to think about anything like that growing up and I bet you didn't either, but these kids go to school every day with things that we would never dream about. And so I think lawmakers might take a page from Skillman and actually talk to students who are in schools, rural, urban, public, private, charter. You know, I think that that's really important because they're not hearing...they're hearing from teachers' unions. They're hearing from lobbyists. They're hearing from all the special interest groups, including charters, but I don't think they talk to kids very much.

Jim Goenner ([40:32](#)):

There's a great book called The One Best System and basically it talks about this idea that there is one best, when really there's different areas, different needs, different desires and so how do you provide that choice so people can be responsive because the needs in Traverse City are different than other needs. The needs within different parts of Detroit, within families, those desires are so diverse. And so that's one of the things that we've been hoping is that we wouldn't just have choice, but we'd have a diverse array of choices so that parents and students, and even the educators could be attracted to places where kids come first, the taxpayer's money is taken care of, but then they could pursue a mission within a broader framework of public education.

Mary Kramer ([41:22](#)):

I think that that's a good construct, but I also have always wondered you know, charters aren't unique to Michigan. There's a lot of very successful charter schools. I remember watching the video, the documentary "Waiting for Superman." That turned a lot of people on to choice and you watch what happened in Washington and you see the successful charters in other cities. So it's always been curious to me that the big charter operators, Green Dot, or Kipp, or some of the really successful... you're right, you should have different models, but the ones who really know what they're doing and have done it successfully in so many areas, they're not here. They're not in Michigan. Why? If I were a lawmaker, if I were a policymaker, I would be asking why.

Jim Goenner ([42:21](#)):

And that's an important question, right? To ask why, whether you're a governing board member of a charter school or of an authorizing agency or a lawmaker, because what's beyond those whys really gets you to the core of the issue. And I think that's the elegance of talking to the students because you lose all the filters of the adults and you're hearing directly from the people that are getting the education and experiencing the things associated with school and it's unfiltered. And then we're looking for genuine, authentic, because you can't fix what you don't know about. So I'm holding Grand Valley's "25 Years of Innovation." Twenty-five years of being a public school authorizer in Michigan from the first school, Excel Academy, with a few hundred students to now nearly 80 public schools serving 35,000 students. What do you think the future for Grand Valley looks like both as an authorizer and as a public university?

Mary Kramer ([43:22](#)):

Well, I think the new president has a philosophy of lifelong learning. And one of the first things that she did, she's only been there a year, July of 2018, or excuse me, 2019. And so one of the things that she talked about at her installation was the idea of having the relationship with the student beyond their degree. So a four year degree, you may need a stackable credit later. You may need something in, you know, that is a badge not a degree, but you need to be able to get it from somewhere, why not Grand Valley? And so I think that lifelong relationship and with the charter students, it's not really important. I would be great if they come to Grand Valley, but it's important just to be that part of that path towards education, towards life success and I think Grand Valley is well positioned for that, whether it's having charter school holding charter schools to a standard of excellence and trying to be well over the bar of the traditional public or the other charter down the street. So I think that those are the things that we want to focus on at Grand Valley. I think that President Mantella wants to make sure that first we get through COVID safely. And she has a terrific reopening plan for the university. She and her team have worked very hard on it, and I think it will be one of the standards for the state of Michigan. But beyond that, I am going to be excited to watch her build a lifelong learning, build Grand Valley as a lifelong learning center that's going to benefit west Michigan, southeast Michigan, and beyond.

Jim Goenner:

Wonderful, Mary Kramer. Thank you so much.

Mary Kramer ([45:19](#)):

Thank you.