

2009 Honoree - Gayle R. Davis



Dr. Gayle R. Davis

**Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Grand Valley State University**

Gayle Davis was born in Ohio, and lived in several other locations in the South and Midwest as a child. She earned her BA in French at Muskingum College in New Concord, Ohio, and her MA in art history and PhD in American Studies from Michigan State University. Her doctoral dissertation was among the first in her academic program to focus on women and the arts. Following completion of her PhD in 1981, Dr. Davis moved to Kansas to join the faculty at Wichita State University. She was a member of the Women's Studies Department for 12 years, serving as chairperson for several years. Her multidisciplinary teaching and research focused on women's art and material culture, contemporary women's cooperative galleries, US women's social history, and social movement theory. She was awarded several faculty honors and grants at Wichita State, including the Kansas Board of Regents Excellence in Teaching Award. In 1994, she moved into central administration at Wichita State University as an Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research.

Upon returning to Michigan in 2002 to assume the duties of Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Grand Valley State University, "she has accomplished several tasks that people at GVSU said couldn't be done, with firmness, charm, grace, fairness and good humor," writes GVSU President Thomas Haas. "At the same time, Gayle has been very deliberate about promoting, recruiting and hiring highly qualified women to positions of authority and influence. Of the 13 deans who now report to her, she has hired all but 2, and the Deans Council has evolved from predominantly white males when she arrived, to a more representative mix (7 males -- 3 of whom are minority -- and 6 women). Her own staff consists of 2 males and 3 females, all promoted from within the university."

Dr. Davis explains her rationale for such leadership choices: "Now, the so-called "female" attributes of collaboration, support, fairness, personal expressiveness, and consensus-building are even beginning to be seen as preferred styles by some. Nonetheless, as long as society identifies various leadership perspectives and practices as either male or female, no leaders can escape the pressures of gendered expectations, making it difficult or impossible for them to be 'themselves' and act freely in ways most personally effective for the work at hand." Despite this difficulty, Dr. Davis always combines her personal visions and values with professional acumen and insight.

Dr. Davis uses her leadership skills to benefit the community and higher education in Michigan outside of GVSU. Dr. Haas catalogues some of the more important recent contributions: "She is active in the community and has the deserved reputation as a person of clear vision, directness, honesty, and genuine concern for others. She has been Chair of the Academic Officers of the State University President's Council and has served on the Grand Rapids Art and Museum Commission and Goodwill Industries Board of Directors. Modest about her achievements, she was nevertheless named to the American Heart Association Circle of Red and to the Inforum Inner Circle. She was also named by *Grand Rapids Business Journal* as one of the 50 Most Influential Women in West Michigan and received

the YWCA Tribute Award.”

In accepting the Network’s award, Dr. Davis shared good advice for leadership success: “Always, the first strategy for success is to be completely prepared for the desired role, including formal and informal education, training, or experience. Second, I encourage women to be conscious of the gender role expectations prevalent in their desired leadership environment. To understand a group’s role expectations is to be prepared to capitalize on the positive and mitigate negative judgments others might assign to a professional’s actions. Third, I encourage women to become highly self aware. In addition to honestly assessing the skills and weaknesses we all bring to our positions, we also should analyze the direct or indirect behavioral messages previously received, and either adopted or rejected in our lives. It is far easier to confidently address problems if we are conscious of whether these problems have to do with our behaviors, or whether or not there are gender role pressures that might further or impede our progress. Fourth, I encourage all women to maintain a group of supportive and trusted colleagues to whom we can turn during both the good and the difficult times we will encounter as leaders.”