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# Inaugural Address by Dr. Edward Montgomery

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP,  
EMBRACING OUR STRENGTH THROUGH  
DIVERSITY

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## **Inaugural address by Dr. Edward Montgomery**

**Ninth president of Western Michigan University**

**Sept. 15, 2017**

Thank you Chair Rinvelt for those kind words. I am humbled and privileged to be among the small group of academic leaders asked to lead this great University. In 114 years, just eight others have had this opportunity. It is an honor to be the ninth and be able to stand upon the shoulders of Presidents Waldo, Sangren, Miller, Bernhard, Haenicke, Floyd, Bailey and Dunn and reap the fruits of their labor.

My predecessors, working hand in hand with the great faculty, staff, students and alumni of Western Michigan University as well as with this great Kalamazoo community, have built this remarkable institution. I must especially acknowledge and thank Dr. Dunn. I will always appreciate your great work as the eighth president of WMU. In the past month, I have had the chance to sit in your seat and even drive this institution around a bit so to speak. I must say I feel a little bit like a teenager being handed the keys to the family car only to go to the garage, open it up and find it's a Vette. WOW. Thanks, John. It really is a great day to be a Bronco!

To Governor Snyder and all of you on the platform party, thank you for your kind words of welcome. And to members of the Western Michigan University Board of Trustees, let me express my appreciation for entrusting the care of this great University to me. For those of you here representing our sister institutions, I offer gratitude for your taking time to be here with us today. And to the students, faculty, staff and community members who are here today to witness and celebrate this moment of transition, I pledge to work hand in glove with you in the coming years to make sure WMU remains a special place and that it lives up to your expectations.

I am blessed to be able to share this day with my wife Kari, two daughters Lindsay and Elizabeth and our son E.J. Without their love and support my life's journey would certainly not be as sweet and I certainly would not be here today. My brother is also here to keep me humble in the ways only a big brother can. My best friend of nearly 55 years is also here, but we are hustling him out of town right after the ceremony before he can share too many stories of my youth with you. Let me also acknowledge the presence of members of our immediate and extended families, and the many dear friends and colleagues who have traveled from around the state and country to be here today. Thank you for sharing this special moment.

## Locally Impactful

Today's inauguration ceremony signifies both the start of a new chapter for WMU and the continuation of the century-old love affair between this campus and the Kalamazoo community. Indeed, this ceremony occurs at the beginning of CommUniverCity weekend in which each year WMU and the city of Kalamazoo celebrate their shared history and strong bond. We chose this weekend purposefully as a way to demonstrate that while the leadership of this University may change, there exists an enduring commitment to the community that gave us birth and with whom we are inextricably tied.

The citizens of Michigan have long recognized a social obligation to educate our youth. Indeed, Michigan was one of the earliest states in the union to adopt compulsory attendance laws so that all children would receive at least some schooling. If child welfare was to be enhanced via mandatory schooling, then teachers were necessary, so the first state normal school was created in 1853 in Ypsilanti. In the 1890s two other state normal schools were added in the northern and central parts of the state but efforts to create one in the west were met with resistance. In 1901 legislation to create a fourth normal school in the west was vetoed by the then governor. Finally, in 1903, Governor Bliss signed new piece of legislation to create a normal school in the west.

Now, for those of you who think in the good old days the Legislature was just generous with money and throwing it at new institutions, I want you to know when they created this school, they appropriated \$1 to buy 20 acres of land. Clearly, philanthropy and community support were always going to be necessary to have successful education.

Within six days of the passage of this legislation, the business, civic and community leaders of Kalamazoo had banded together to try to secure this new institution. They faced fierce competition from at least 30 cities and towns but were able to prevail, due in part to a concerted and coordinated effort by leading citizens of the city to secure options on three potential sites and the passage of a bond issue for the then-huge sum of \$70,000 to establish the school. Think about the vote to pass that bond issue, and put it in today's context. That bond issue passed by an 8-to-1 margin, a remarkable statement of the support of this community for the creation of this University—a remarkable statement.

Kalamazoo's enduring belief in the power of education to uplift its citizens and to transform the communities they live in continues to this day. In 2005, this community's commitment to the promise of higher education took an unprecedented leap forward with the creation of the Kalamazoo Promise, placing higher education within the reach of all children in the city through the most generous and comprehensive scholarship program in the nation.

WMU has benefited enormously from this community's faith in higher education and its willingness to partner. In just the past decade or so these partnerships have given rise to the WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine, the WMU Business Technology and Research Park and even a state-of-the-art facility to house our community's precious archives—The Zhang Legacy Collections Center.

From those early days, our name has changed but our mission has not. The slogan “**That All May Learn**” from President Sangren's era captures our commitment to being the school of

choice for the men and women of this community, state and region. To do this we have broadened our programming thereby becoming a comprehensive university where students can study everything from accountancy to zoology; that has professional schools training pilots, occupational therapists and supply chain managers; that champions the liberal arts and the fine arts; and where engineers and natural scientists can study the cosmos or splice the human genome.

From an initial class of 117 students we now have nearly 23,000 students taking classes at WMU, and our original 20-acre campus has grown to more than 1,200 acres. Where once there were 320 residents in Kalamazoo for every student at WMU, now there are about four.

With this growth WMU has chosen not to hide behind ivy-covered walls but to sink deep roots into this community. We serve as an anchor institution for our city, our state and our region. What started as a one-way street of support from the city to the university has evolved into a vibrant partnership in which WMU has become integral to the economic, social and cultural well-being of this city and region.

We are the third largest employer and the economic impact of our activities contributes about a billion dollars per year in goods and services in the Kalamazoo/Portage area. The university also impacts our city and community by being a magnet for complementary businesses and “knowledge” sector workers, through our teaching which produces a skilled workforce and engaged citizenry; through our creative and artistic activities further enriching and nourishing our local cultural scene; through our clinics that provide health and counseling services to Kalamazoo residents; and through a myriad of other venues in which our faculty and students share their expertise to provide solutions to civic and economic problems.

In my view, being a good partner locally must be a central piece of our strategy to impact the world around us. Far too many universities actively strive to be global players while missing or being indifferent to the problems going on right in their own backyards. One cannot claim to be interested in the solutions to global poverty but ignore poverty in Detroit or Kalamazoo. One cannot claim to be a leader in global water policy but ignore the Flint water crisis.

An active partnership between town and gown may not be the norm with all universities, but it is part of what makes this community and this place and this community special. Expect more of such partnerships and a continually deepening Bronco presence in our town, our state and our region, even as we strive to enhance our global reach and character.

The Signature Program we launched this fall will provide even more opportunities for our students to find and pursue their passions outside of the classroom. Many of these pathways will afford additional opportunities to engage in our local community. One hundred and fourteen years ago, the partnership that underlies CommUniverCity was started, under my tenure **it will keep on rocking**.

#### **Pursuit of excellence**

In the days and weeks since I was appointed by the Board of Trustees, I have had the opportunity to begin to meet with faculty, students, staff, alumni and community leaders. I have traveled to

Detroit multiple times, been to Chicago and even L.A. I have visited churches, had ice cream with our staff, spoken at Stampedes and even ridden a mechanical bull—very, very briefly. I've had the chance to network with Kalamazoo police, spoken at a 9/11 memorial, I've begun rehearsing for Dancing with the Stars, and I've even embarrassed myself in front of the golf coach. Our campus ambassadors and resident assistants have cheered me, our band has serenaded my wife and I, and the rugby team has reminded me that I am not a young man anymore. Through each of these interactions and dozens more, I have begun to develop a profound appreciation for the pride the WMU community has in this institution and how incredibly special the people who work and learn here are.

Now, I did have a little head start on getting to know this great University, albeit an unusual one for someone who becomes a president. For the past three-plus years, I viewed Western Michigan University through the lens of a parent with a student enrolled here in the Haworth College of Business. I have heard about great advisors and challenging but caring faculty members who sometime caused my son to spend late nights at the library. His mother and I just discovered that the Library is the name of a local bar. We could see how this place changed him for the better and prepared him for a bright future.

As I have engaged members of this community, I have also heard over and over again that there is a thirst to take the next step, to elevate this institution to the next level, to be even more impactful in the lives of our students, and through the reach of our research and creative activities. The campus is incredibly resilient and has weathered many storms over the past decades. It is proud of what has been accomplished but ready to fulfill its potential. This is a campus with a strong desire to advance to the next tier—to join the ranks of the very leading public research universities in the country, and to do it in a way that keeps our students at the core of everything we do. We are big enough to be one of only 74 institutions in the country with a law and medical school, yet small enough that our faculty know our students' names and are actively involved in mentoring them.

Our alums speak over and over about WMU being the place that gave them a chance—sometimes even a second chance—to succeed. This is our soul, the essence of what makes this a special University. **Our quest for excellence is not despite our students, it is because of them.** To help them fulfill their potential—to embed a lifelong thirst for discovery, to help them become ethically engaged citizens—requires us to continually look for ways to strengthen our programs, improve our pedagogy, broaden our research, scholarship and creative activities, and enrich their co-curricular activities. By ensuring their success, we ensure our success.

For me, a key element is ensuring that more students graduate in a timely fashion with less debt so they may go onto successful careers and lives. We know how to do this for pockets of our students. Our challenge is how to take that to scale as an institution so that everyone who enters our gates is positioned to succeed. To meet this goal will require a systematic look at everything from financial aid to housing policies, to advising, to the structure of our gateway classes. But, I am confident that we have the talent, the expertise, imagination and the will to accomplish this task. Western was created to serve this goal—a place where the American Dream could be realized.

To do that, we must work together as a team. Academic disciplines, departments and colleges can serve as incredible incubators of collaboration and creativity or they can serve as silos that divide people and ideas. We must combat the tendency in academia to build fragmentary empires that lead to needless duplication and make the whole of our institution less than the sum of its parts. We must foster a spirit of connectedness across our academic disciplines and departments as well as across our administrative areas. Far too many of the challenges we face or the opportunities we could exploit require collaborative efforts. Hunkering down in silos wastes our scarce resources and keeps us from reaching our potential. We need to make sure our budgetary practices and operating rules promote and reward the pursuit of excellence rather than making us prisoner to the past. “We’ve always done it this way” is not a very strong operating principle.

We must not only work as a team internally, we must also work better as a team with our alumni and external stakeholders. We have been the place where first-generation students were welcome; where low-income and middle-class students could get a quality education; and where the promise of higher education as a great equalizer was still realized. To continue to honor this commitment, we must vigorously pursue alternative funding sources.

Today, about 98 percent of our revenue comes either state support or tuition. The state support level has been static or declining for public institutions in nearly every state of the union for the past 30 years. To remain accessible, we must continually monitor and fight to minimize tuition increases. This also will require us to be more entrepreneurial, less dependent on people coming to us and more active in seeking them. Being more entrepreneurial will require us to be more nimble, to be willing to take risks, to actively seek new opportunities to reach nontraditional students, and to offer more hybrid and nontraditional degrees and programs. Quality must never be sacrificed. We have amazing faculty who have amazing ideas. We must empower and support them. At the same time, we must also harness the enthusiasm of our alumni and supporters for this institution to ensure future generations will continue to benefit from this special place.

#### Closing

Jackie Robinson famously said “**A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.**” I was raised by two wonderful loving parents who unfortunately have passed away and so could not be here with us today. My mom was the daughter of a butcher who came north during the Great Migration from Mississippi. He worked in the stockyards of Chicago and raised eight children. My dad was the son of an insurance executive from Main Line Philadelphia. They came together from two very different worlds at a time when their union was actually illegal in many states of this country. Over their 59 years together they shared both a love of family and a deep and abiding faith in the ability of ordinary people to bond together and improve their lot. They didn’t just talk it, they were actively involved in that process every day through their actions. Their expectations of their children were high, but at the end of the day all they wanted was for us to be people of character and to do something that mattered in this world.

Over the past 35 years since I started my career, those jobs that have made me happiest were the ones in which I was part of a group of men and women who were trying to make the world a better place. They weren’t always the easiest jobs and often the tasks felt thankless. But there is something special about being around people who share a commitment to the common good; who use their talents and skills to protect and increase opportunity for others; who believe

everyone has value—that **all** human beings should be treated with dignity and **That All May Learn**. I have found such a place with such an incredible group of people right here in Kalamazoo. Western is an amazing institution that has had **a real impact** on the lives of its students and on the community, state and region where it is located. I am honored to lead this school and privileged to be a member of Bronco nation.

Have no doubt that our work is cut out for us. Our goals are lofty and we swim against many currents. Martin Luther King said “...but as difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future.” I have such a faith in the future of this University. I see new accomplishment and incredible promise on our horizon. Together, we can take the next steps. Together, we can chart a new course. Together, we can have an impact.

Thank you.