The Western Insider

Western Michigan University

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Welcome to the first edition of a new e-newsletter for faculty and staff, The Western Insider. It's designed to keep you informed about important matters impacting our campus community and highlight the accomplishments and achievements of you and your colleagues.

'Collectively, we are making strides'

During his third State of the University address, President Montgomery thanked faculty and staff for their dedication. He also challenged us to continue elevating the institution as a school of choice for 21st-century learners.

Watch here >

The Big News about Think Big

Following months of valuable work from the campus and greater community, the Big Idea that emerged from the Think Big initiative will be presented during four town hall sessions in October.

The Big Idea presented will be the promise that we will make to our stakeholders, the special thing WMU brings to the world—our North Star. Like all Think Big engagements, there will be opportunities for the community to influence and guide the final outcome at the town halls. Your engagement and good thinking are needed.

RSVP here >
Get ready!
WMU’s third annual Giving Day is set for Wednesday, Oct. 9, this year. Learn more at wmualumni.org/givingday

Outstanding faculty, staff members awarded WMU's highest honors
Learn more >
New interim deans highlight WMU innovation, expertise

Learn more >

Native seed project helps WMU get back to its roots

Learn more >
WMU in the news

Celebrating success
The Washington Post praised WMU's celebrated Seita Scholars program for helping students succeed against the odds.

Washington Post

Combating the opioid crisis
WWMT and WMUK reported on the College of Health and Human Services team that secured a $1.35M federal grant to help battle the opioid epidemic through innovative programming.

WWMT  WMUK

Diversifying STEM
WOOD TV 8 viewers learned about the nearly $1M NSF grant WMU researchers will use to help develop strategies to get more female faculty involved in science and technology fields.

WOOD TV

(269) 387-8400
marcom@wmich.edu
Attend a Phase 4 Town Hall

YOUR NEXT OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE

Phase Four will culminate in four Town Halls, October 14 - 31. The Campus Community will also have an opportunity to take a deep dive into the marketing research on October 15. Please RSVP for a Town Hall and the Marketing Research Presentation. We’ll see you there!

Your name *
Your email *
Affiliation * - Select -

Phase 4 Town Hall Dates
☐ October 14, 3 to 5 p.m., Bernhard Center South Ballroom
☐ October 15, 9 to 11 a.m., Bernhard Center South Ballroom
☐ October 30, 3 to 5 p.m., Bernhard Center Rooms 208-210
☐ October 31, 2 to 4 p.m., Bernhard Center South Ballroom

Marketing Research Deep Dive
☐ October 15, 1:30 pm to 3 pm, Bernhard Center Rooms 105-107

What to expect at the Town Halls

At the October Town Halls, the Think Big team will present the Big Idea. The Big Idea will be the promise that we make to our stakeholders, the special thing we bring to the world—our North Star. Like all Think Big engagements, there will be opportunities for engagement and influence on the final outcome.
Outstanding faculty, staff members awarded WMU's highest honors

Contact: Erin Flynn
September 18, 2019

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Eleven of Western Michigan University's most impressive faculty and staff members will be recognized for their work with students and contributions to the University during Fall Convocation. While furthering WMU's missions of education and innovation, these employees go above and beyond to ensure the success of students and colleagues, making campus a better place to work and learn.

The Distinguished Service, Distinguished Faculty Scholar, Distinguished Teaching, Emerging Scholar and Make a Difference awards will be presented during a ceremony at 11 a.m. Friday, Sept. 20, on the second floor of the Bernhard Center.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD
This year's recipients of the Distinguished Service Award will join 67 faculty and staff members who have received the accolade. Diana Hernández, Dr. Wei-Chiao Huang and Dr. William Rantz were chosen from among nominees across campus who have demonstrated exceptional service in areas that reflect innovative and effective programming, increase WMU's stature or extend WMU's impact and presence into the larger community. Read the full story.

Diana Hernández

During my time as a Western Michigan University student, I learned through my peers and various student organizations of the type of support that Diana Hernández provides for so many. She is highly respected and cared for among students, and staff as well. The impact that Diana Hernández makes on each student whose life is touched by her encouragement and persistence for excellence serves as a testament for the care of the faculty at Western Michigan University.

Dr. Wei-Chiao Huang
In his 33 years as a professor at Western Michigan University, he has long exemplified a high level of commitment and leadership to the University that can serve as a model, not just only for other professors, but for alumni like myself and others. Professor Wei-Chiao Huang’s exemplary service to Western Michigan University and its students can be seen in the many innovative and effective programs he has helped create and flourish.

![Professor Wei-Chiao Huang]

**Dr. William Rantz**

Bill’s strength lies in his ability to maintain a steady hand; no matter how difficult the people and circumstances might be. Bill is recognized by his peers as someone who always takes the high road. In sum, Bill Rantz is the consummate professional.

**DISTINGUISHED FACULTY SCHOLAR AWARD**

Established in 1978, the Distinguished Faculty Scholar Award is the highest annual honor WMU bestows on faculty members. The award program recognizes those whose work constitutes a significant body of achievement, largely while a faculty member at WMU, that is widely recognized within the national and international academic communities. This year’s recipient is **Dr. Brian Wilson**, professor of comparative religion. Read about his accomplishments.
Dr. Brian Wilson

As a colleague, he is thoughtful, generous and responsive; as a scholar, he is exemplary, careful and thorough in his research, creative and insightful in his analysis and interpretations, and notably lucid and accessible in his writing.

DISTINGUISHED TEACHING AWARD

Recognizing faculty members who are exceptional educators and mentors and who demonstrate outstanding dedication to their work, the Distinguished Teaching Award is the University’s highest award recognizing faculty for their work with students. **Dr. Matthew Mingus** and **Dr. Leah Omilion-Hodges** received the honor this year. [Read the full story](#).

Dr. Matthew Mingus

I appreciate the breadth of material he has offered, his facility with multiple delivery platforms, his willingness to move across related disciplines, the practical experience in the fields that inform his teaching, and his efforts to bring international perspectives to WMU.
Dr. Leah Omilion-Hodges

One of her hallmarks as a professor is how quickly students become comfortable sharing their perspectives and participating in high-level critical thinking during classroom discussion. She shows great attention to planning her course schedule, activities and projects in order to be challenging, thought provoking and clearly designed for students success.

EMERGING SCHOLAR AWARD

It is designed to celebrate the contributions of faculty who are in the first decade of their careers at WMU and who, by virtue of their contributions to scholarship or creative activity, have achieved national recognition and demonstrated outstanding promise to achieve renown in their continuing work. Dr. Elena Litvinova, associate professor of physics, is this year's recipient. [Read about her work.](#)

Dr. Elena Litvinova
I evaluate the scholarly work performed by professor Litvinova very highly and amongst the most impactful in the international theoretical nuclear science community. She conducts forefront science and makes important and unique contributions to the field, with applications in nuclear astrophysics and beyond.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE AWARD

First awarded in 1995, the annual Make a Difference Award is the highest accolade WMU bestows specifically on non-faculty employees for their service. Four recipients are chosen from each academic year's semiannual award winners—representing the best of the best. This year's honorees include Dr. Vun Doublestein, Rebecca Huntley, Shari Rose and Dustin Skaggs. Read the full story.

Dr. Vun Doublestein

She deserves this award because of her dedication, hard work, knowledge and caring attitude towards all individuals within the program she directs as well as Western Michigan University's campus as a whole.
Rebecca Huntley

She is undoubtedly everybody's go-to person. Rebecca is reliable, helpful, consistent, proactive, intelligent, humorous, warm, kind, supportive, efficient, thoughtful and knowledgeable.

Shari Rose

I'm not sure how she manages to be excellent and on-point 24/7, but she is. She goes above and beyond her duties as an enrollment assistant and always does it with the most positive attitude.

Dustin Skaggs

He exemplifies professionalism in all his actions. He cares about our students greatly and continues to work diligently to solve issues each and every day to ensure their experience on campus is excellent.
KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Dr. Irma Lopez and Dr. Steven Butt accepted new challenges with the dawn of this new academic year: Lopez as the new interim dean of the Lee Honors College and Butt as the new interim dean of the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences.

Lopez, during her 25-year tenure as a Spanish professor on faculty at WMU, has often embraced leadership roles, serving as both the chair of the Spanish department and the interim director of the Institute of Intercultural and Anthropological Studies.

She has advised students living abroad as they pursue their ambitions, and her inspirational and skillful expertise as both a teacher and a mentor has been integral to the success of myriad Broncos. Among her many accomplishments, Lopez was honored with the University’s first Distinguished Teaching Awards in 2007.
Also not a stranger to innovative leadership, Butt has served as chair of both the Department of Engineering Design, Manufacturing and Management Systems and the Department of Industrial and Entrepreneurial Engineering and Engineering Management since 2014.

As a professor on faculty for the past 21 years, he has not only adeptly guided students to realize their goals, he has been essential in the development of the AMP Lab @ WMU, the engineering program at Aquinas College, and the master's degree in medical engineering program housed in the WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine.

Dr. Christine Byrd-Jacobs also is one of the WMU’s newer deans. In May, Byrd-Jacobs was appointed interim dean of the Graduate College. She is a professor of biological sciences and had served as the college's associate dean. Learn more Byrd-Jacobs and her appointment here.

Native seed project helps WMU get back to its roots

Contact: Jeanne Baron
September 25, 2019

Video of LifMcFici_8

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—The verdant and beautifully flowered campus environment the Western Michigan University community returned to this fall came courtesy of Landscape Services. They readied campus for the academic year by planting as well as planning for the future.

In August, Landscape Services employees gathered in the Department of Biological Sciences' Finch Greenhouse to transplant hundreds of native plants started in the greenhouse from seeds that were hand collected as part of WMU’s Native Plant Propagation Project.
The project began in 2008 as a collaboration between the greenhouse and the natural areas program in Landscape Services. Since then, more than 40,000 perennial plants native to southwest Michigan, including some of the most unusual and sought-after species, have been nurtured there.

**Related stories**

- [Decline in pollinators prompts WMU staffers to build them a home](#)
- [Landscapers practicing natural selection management technique](#)
- [Prescribed burns could be set at two Asylum Lake sites Monday, April 22](#)

Native seeds collected by University landscape staff and area volunteers are sprouted in Finch and planted on campus as well as distributed to nonprofits and other organizations in the local area. For WMU, growing the fledgling plants fits seamlessly into the ecological restoration landscape management technique it has been gradually introducing.

The technique allows native plants and nature to revitalize land parcels, eliminating the need for costly chemicals, mowing and other traditional methods for maintaining manicured landscapes—methods that can negatively impact the environment.

During the greenhouse gathering, WMU staffers transplanted many of the Native Plant Propagation Project's seedlings into waiting containers that they care for until the seedlings can be planted at various ecological restoration sites around campus.

**GREENHOUSE GREENERY**

Christopher Jackson, greenhouse specialist in the biological sciences department, says Finch has long served as an incubator for plants WMU needs for educational purposes and for the University's campus beautification and sustainability efforts.

"Since I've been here, I've opened up the greenhouse to members of the Landscape Services staff and students who work with the Office for Sustainability," Jackson says. "If all of the research space isn't being used by our faculty, there's no sense in having empty rooms when we can fill them with things that can help beautify campus or help our community in other ways."
Jackson waters some of the flats of plants he grows and nurtures at Finch. Finch, which is attached to Wood Hall, provides quality plants needed for academic classes as well as state-of-the-art space for students and faculty to conduct research and for the biological sciences department to maintain a permanent conservatory collection.

A mix of native and non-native vegetation adds beauty to the campus. Jackson says the facility also assists Landscape Services by growing many of the petunias, coleus, chrysanthemums and fall kale seen around campus. Overall, he says, it supplies hundreds of these non-native plants for campus beautification each year.

But whenever possible, Jackson notes that Finch assists with the University's sustainability efforts.
It provides space and services early in the year to grow hundreds of vegetable and other seedlings for the Office for Sustainability's Gibbs House farm and Community Garden. These seedlings are used for the office's student research projects as well as to supplement WMU's student food pantry.

In addition, the greenhouse stores and starts the native seeds collected for the Native Plant Propagation Project.

"It's a really sustainable project. I've not had to purchase native seeds," Jackson says. "But we couldn't do it without the volunteers. We have people out collecting seeds because it's a labor-intensive thing to collect, clean, cold-store and transplant them."

GOING NATIVE

Among the staffers at the Finch Greenhouse gathering was Stephen Root, a Landscape Services supervisor. Root now serves as his unit's liaison with the greenhouse on the Native Plant Propagation Project. He says WMU has been doing native plantings for years, including in stormwater collection and filtration areas as well as steep slopes that can't be mowed effectively, or in many cases, safely.

Stephan Keto, who retired in Aug. 9, spent part of his last days as WMU's manager of natural areas and preserves helping out at the Finch Greenhouse gathering. On hand to give a transplanting tutorial, he spoke about the Native Plant Propagation project, which he was instrumental in building as well as overseeing Landscape Services.

"It's all about diversity. It's diversity of plants, diversity of soil organisms, diversity of birds, diversity of animals. It builds on itself," Keto says. "Native plants are standard material for commercial stormwater features, residential rain gardens, buffer strips, bio-swales, permaculture gardens, wildlife habitat and pollinator gardens."

For more information, contact Christopher Jackson at c.d.jackson@wmich.edu or (269) 387-5618 or Stephen Root at steve.root@wmich.edu or (269) 387-8557.
By Valerie Strauss

Why do so many college students drop out, and what can be done about it?


Kirp writes:

"Higher education is billed as the ticket of admission to America’s middle class. That’s true for students who earn a bachelor’s degree — their lifetime earnings will be nearly $1 million more than those with only a high school diploma, and the gap keeps widening as more employers demand a university credential."
But the contention that college is the engine of social mobility is false advertising for the 34 million Americans over twenty-five — that’s more than 10 percent of the entire US population — who have some college credits but dropped out before receiving a diploma. Many of them are actually worse off economically than if they hadn’t started college. While they earn a little more than those who never went beyond high school, they leave college with a pile of debt... Dropouts are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as college grads, and they are four times more likely to default on students loans, thus wrecking their credit and shrinking their career options.

...The fact that 40 percent of college freshmen never make it to commencement is higher education’s dirty little secret, a dereliction of duty that has gotten too little public attention.”

Kirp says that some students drop out because of money problems, “and others realize that colleges isn’t for them.” But, he writes, many “depart because the institution hasn’t give them the we-have-your-back support they need.”

Here’s a brief Q&A with Kirp about his new book. He is a former journalist and member of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential transition team. He is also the author of other books, including “Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America’s Schools,” which was named outstanding book of 2013 by the American Educational Research Association.

**Q:** For starters, I’m interested in what propelled you to write this book now.

**A:** The simple answer is this — I became angry when I learned that 40 percent of undergraduates drop out of college, with all the life-changing consequences that follow, while most colleges
were doing little, if anything, to address the problem. I became even angrier when I realized the raw deal that “new gen” undergraduates — minority, poor and first in their family to go to college — have been getting. The situation really is a scandal, and — j’accuse — I wanted to call attention to a problem that had gotten little airtime.

I also had it in mind to show that there’s nothing inevitable about a 40 percent dropout rate — that it is not, as apologists for the status quo would have it, the fault of the students. I was encouraged by the fact that some universities are moving the needle on student success and closing the opportunity gap, and I started writing columns about those schools.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. I am a policy maven and a storyteller — the six most irresistible words in the English language are “let me tell you a story” — so I set off on a cross-country journey to learn about what worked.

**Q: Tell me more about the 40 percent dropout rate.**
**Who drops out and from where — and why?**
**A:** The dropout rate is highest at community colleges. There, fewer than 40 percent graduate or transfer in six years (that’s three times the norm).

**Q: Public universities have a 50 percent dropout rate?**
**That is astounding. Has that changed over time or been consistent?**
**A:** Half the students at public universities drop out. The graduation rate for black and Latino students, and students
receiving Pell grants [federal grants for low-income students] is 10 to 20 percent lower. But universities vary widely in how well they do by their students.

Q: The grad rate for black and Latino students and those with Pell grants is 10 to 20 percent lower than whom? Whites? Asians?

A: The comparison is to the overall graduation rate. But it doesn’t have to be this way! Some of the schools that I profile, like the University of Central Florida, have essentially eliminated the gap. And at Georgia State, the “new gen” students — underrepresented minorities, first in their family to go to college and Pell grant recipients — all graduate at rates higher than the overall graduation rate.

Q: To what do you attribute the variation in graduation rates among universities with similar freshman class profiles?

A: The graduation rate at universities with a similar freshman class profile varies as much as 20 percent. And at schools with the same overall graduation rate, the gap between the “new gen” undergrads ... and the rest of the campus varies even more. A new-gen student, choosing between two schools with similar admissions standards, may be half as likely to graduate if she makes the wrong choice. Unfortunately, when students apply to college, graduation is rarely on their minds — every freshman believes she’ll earn a degree.
The variation in graduation rates among schools with similar student profiles is an effective rebuttal to those who argue that the fault is with the students — that “if you give us better students we have higher graduation rates for it.” Successful universities have adopted some of the techniques that I write about in “The College Dropout Scandal,” including combining data analytics (number-crunching with big data sets involving student performance) with intense counseling and brief online experiences — developed by social psychologists — that are designed to give students a sense of belonging. In general, a university that makes student success a priority as opposed to an afterthought is going to have a higher graduation rate than a comparable institution where the leadership is focused on moving up the greasy pole of the U.S. News & World Report [rankings].

Q: **Can you briefly describe one intervention that has worked?**

A: One intervention that works:

Let’s talk about a group that gets very little airtime — foster kids are least likely to graduate — only 8 to 10 percent of them earn a bachelor of arts degree, a far worse track record than “new gen” students. That’s understandable. They’ve been bounced around from one family to another, and probably had a weak high school education. They have no money and no one to steer them through the process of applying for college.
Western Michigan University decided to change the equation of failure, and it is succeeding. WMU gives these students a free financial ride. At least as important is how the university intentionally builds a community, beginning the summer before college. They live on campus during the time they’re enrolled at WMU. Crucially, they have a “coach” who takes on the roles of academic adviser, social worker, mentor and parent.

This support pays off: 44 percent of the foster-care youth graduate, and while that’s below the 54 percent overall graduation rate at WMU, it’s a whole lot better than 10 percent!

**Western Michigan University receives grant to combat opioid epidemic**

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services announced a new grant to Western Michigan University for its Opioid Workforce Expansion Program.

U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph wrote a letter to the Health Resources and Services Administration in April 2019, advocating for additional funding, Josh Paciorek with Upton's office said in a release.
The letter states, “The ultimate goal is the facilitation of lives of recovery and wellness for all those with or at risk of OUD/SUD in rural Southwest Michigan with the help of sufficient numbers of treatment providers who are thoroughly trained in interprofessional best practices.”

WMU College of Health and Human Services Dean Ron Cisler said the grant will allow students to participate in hands-on educational experiences that addresses opioid abuse and those who are in immediate, crucial need.

WMU Vice President for Research Dr. Terri Goss Kinzy added, “The work of Dr. Jennifer Harrison and the MY-PROUD team builds on existing relationships with community partners and the faculty expertise at WMU to create experiential training to help address critical issues in opioid abuse. WMU strives to have a public-impact focus to our research and training, and this new HRSA grant exemplifies and recognizes that mission.”

**WMU Program Targets Opioid Crisis**

*Eddie Davis stands beside the gravestone of his son Jeremy who died from the abuse of opioids in July, 2019, in Coalton, Ohio*

Western Michigan University has won a federal grant to help overdoses and deaths related to opioid drugs. The [MY-PROUD program](#) will put masters’ degree students from the College of
Health and Human Services into schools and medical centers. Associate WMU social work professor Jennifer Harrison says they’ll help young people caught up in the opioid abuse epidemic.

"Where we have increasing rates of opioid use disorder and misuse of both prescription opioids as well as heroin and fentanyl, and then importantly an increase in our opioid-related deaths, which is really problematic in southwest Michigan as well as many other areas of the country."

Harrison says MY-PROUD, which stands for “Michigan Youth Prevention and Recovery from Opioid Youth Disorders,” will focus on Calhoun, Van Buren, Muskegon, and Jackson counties. They have the highest opioid-related death rates in the state, and the least access to mental and behavioral health services.

"In Calhoun County, they have the highest fentanyl-related overdose deaths in the state. And in Muskegon County last year it was estimated that there was one opioid use disorder overdose death each day."

Harrison says prevention is a major focus. "We're hoping that people don't develop opioid disorders, that they never start using opioids in a harmful way, or, if they do, that they recover early so that don't risk overdose and death."

But she says there's also an over-arching goal.

"We're hoping to be able to help be one of a number of services that helps bring down that opioid death rate. I think that's ultimately what a lot of these programs addressing opioids are really trying to do is just get ahead of the unacceptable rate of people dying related to opioid use disorders."

MY-PROUD will also offer free staff development training for schools and medical facilities in the four counties over the next three years.
KALAMAZOO, Mich. (WOOD) — Western Michigan University is sharing a nearly a million-dollar grant to find ways to encourage more women to teach in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math.

Western is splitting a $996,000 grant from the National Science Foundation with three other universities to look at ways to recruit and retain more female STEM instructors. The hope is training, mentorship, and other programs will find ways to improve female representation in these fields.

Carla Koretsky, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, says it is important to have female role models for women and girls interested in STEM careers.

“I think we miss out when women, or women of color, feel like this is not the career for them,” Koretsky said. “We’re missing a huge talent base that we need in this country.”

Graduate student Bonnie Ebendick-Corpus is hard at work studying cell biology this semester. She left her job at a small company and returned to academia to pursue an advanced degree.
“In the last job, I was the only female working at the company,” Ebendick-Corpus said.

She believes programs like this can help identify and overcome barriers for women working in the sciences and will benefit society as a whole.

According to Koretsky, there are many reasons why women and girls do not pursue or stay in STEM careers.

“I think there’s a lot of unconscious bias and a lot of messaging that goes out to young girls that math and science are really more for men,” Koretsky said.

The grant will officially kick-in in October and last three years.