2019: A year of #1s at Western

Hidden gem. Innovation leader. WMU is garnering national accolades for its programs propelling students to success. Whether it's the University's commitment to student experiences, dedication to sustainability or emphasis on embracing diversity, Broncos have earned high praise.

Peruse the plaudits >
The top WMU News stories of 2019

Read all about it!

WMU student voting rate shows growing civic engagement

Engineering college’s Advanced Rocketry Club launching NASA competition dream

Alumna’s experience will drive national strategy to combat human trafficking
WMU students in the news

Wassink wins athlete-community service award
Bronco quarterback Jon Wassink has been named the recipient of the Wuerffel Trophy. Known as college football's premier award for community service, it is presented annually to the Football Bowl Subdivision player who best combines exemplary community service with athletic and academic achievement.

WOOD-TV

Brand-new graduate plans to take over Kalamazoo family business
New alumnus Jason Olinger has long wanted to take over his family business with his older brothers. Olinger studied sales and management and says his time at WMU helped prepare him for the future. "It's been a long time coming, but it's finally here."

WWMT
2019: A year of No. 1s at Western

Contact: Erin Flynn
December 20, 2019

Nearly 1,700 Broncos earned degrees at WMU’s fall commencement ceremonies.

Check out WMU’s top news of 2019.

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Hidden gem. Innovation leader. WMU is garnering national accolades for its programs propelling students to success. Whether it’s the University’s commitment to student experiences, dedication to sustainability or emphasis on embracing diversity, Broncos earned high praise in 2019.

"What makes Western Michigan University special is the learning outcomes for all of its students," says the College Gazette, which gave WMU top billing on its list of Best Hidden Gem Public Universities.

Washington Monthly also highlighted WMU as the best public university in Michigan for graduate success based on 10 years of earnings following enrollment. The University ranked No. 1 in graduate earnings and No. 2 in graduation rates as measured among students across all socioeconomic backgrounds.
INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine applauded WMU’s commitment to embracing diversity and inclusion, highlighting the MLK Academy in naming the University a Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award recipient.

The University's commitment to enhancing and highlighting student experiences is getting noticed. WMU Signature recently received the Innovative Program award at the NASPA Region IV-East annual conference. Students who complete WMU Signature receive a co-curricular designation on their diplomas signifying one of nine pathways they can choose to focus on. WMU is the only university in the nation offering the high-level student endorsement.

For the second time in the award program's 15-year existence, a Bronco has won the prestigious Wuerffel Trophy. Quarterback Jon Wassink, who is pursuing a master's degree in accounting, rose to the top of all football players across the country for his service to the community and excellence both on and off the field. He was also a finalist for the William V. Campbell Trophy, considered the "Academic Heisman" by many, for his outstanding performance in the classroom.

The College of Aviation soars high above the competition, consistently ranked among the top programs in the world. This year, the National Air Transportation Association recognized the college with its Industry Excellence Award for excellence in pilot training. It's the first time a four-year institution has been selected for the honor since the award's inception in 1987.
Eddi Codrington plays saxophone during a show.

WMU’s renowned jazz studies program hit some high notes this year. Graduate student Eddie Codrington received the 2019 Herb Alpert Young Jazz Composer Award, which recognizes the most promising jazz artists in the country under the age of 30. Andrew Rathbun, associate professor of saxophone and jazz studies and Codrington’s mentor, earned international recognition this year, as well. His album, "Atwood Suites," was nominated for a JUNO Award for best jazz album.

The Haworth College of Business continues to impress industry leaders, ranked a top sales program by the Sales Education Foundation for several years running. On a program level, sales and business marketing has garnered a top ranking from Study.com this year and every year since 2007. The integrated supply management program also cracked the top 10 of Gartner’s list of Top U.S. Supply Chain Undergraduate Programs for a fourth consecutive year.

A study published in the Journal of the Association for Communication Administration ranks WMU’s School of Communication the top master's degree granting program of its kind in Michigan based on faculty research and productivity.

A number of other accolades and initiatives of note are detailed in the University's top stories of 2019.
WMU student voting rate shows growing civic engagement

Contact: Emily Duguay
November 26, 2019

WMU students who registered to vote participated in elections at a slightly higher rate than at other institutions across the country that participated in a national study.

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Western Michigan University's voter turnout increased from 18.5% to 31.5% in the 2018 midterm election among students registered to vote. This and other findings were revealed as WMU joined more than 1,000 campuses in all 50 states to examine their student registration and voting rates as well as climate for political learning and engagement.

The information was compiled in a database that includes nearly half of all U.S. college students as part of the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. NSLVE is the signature initiative of the Institute for Democracy in Higher Education at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

Also revealed was that registered WMU students voted at a slightly higher rate, or 55.9%, than the average voting rate for students at all participating institutions, or 55%.

WMU's 2018 NSLVE report has been received by WeVote, the University's non-partisan committee committed to voter education, registration and turnout, and will be used to develop strategies for campus initiatives moving forward.
"I'm inspired by the success of campus efforts to increase student voter turnout," says Jeff Breneman, vice president for government relations. "The WeVote initiative—a non-partisan group up of students, faculty and staff—spent countless volunteer hours on efforts to increase voter participation. As a result, 3,000 more WMU students voted in 2018 than 2014. Let’s continue to build upon this success. Doing so will send a clear message to candidates and, ultimately, our elected representatives that Bronco voters are informed, responsible and engaged in our government. This provides us a powerful voice in the political process."

Read WMU’S full NSLVE report at this link.

The national report suggests a promising trajectory to student voting, but there is still much work to do. Moving forward, WeVote has identified a need to focus even more on voter registration. WMU saw a 3.3% increase in registered students, up to 61.8%, but the University trails the national average of 73.3%, which was up 8% from 2014.

Data from the NSLVE report will be used by WeVote and the Office of Government Relations to guide decision-making in continued efforts to increase civic engagement on campus. With the support of University administration, WeVote hopes to bring students, faculty and staff together to work on a wide range of collaborative activities to increase civic engagement on campus.

"WeVote has been incredibly successful in a short time at institutionalizing civic engagement at WMU. As a non-partisan organization, we have done a tremendous job connecting faculty, students and RSO's around campus in helping set a precedent for a civic-minded campus," says WeVote student coordinator Peyton Jorgensen. "As a student in my second year of college, it means so much to me to be able to already leave my stamp on WMU this early into my college career. I hope to continue to help develop WeVote, strengthen our relationships and increase voter turnout for elections at WMU for the future.”

Student understanding of the mechanics of voting, their civil rights, as well as the impact of their vote, are priorities for the campuswide initiative. For more information or to get involved, email or visit.

Student team launching NASA competition dream

Contact: Cindy Schrauben
November 21, 2019

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Alexis Lind has dreamed of building and launching rockets since watching “October Sky” in seventh grade. Now, as part of the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences’ Advanced Rocketry Club, her dream is coming true. The second-year aerospace engineering student and about 25 other club members will compete in the NASA Student Launch competition in April 2020. Western Michigan University’s team was one of 42 college teams, and the only Michigan school, accepted into the prestigious contest.
The NASA competition is a culmination of a strategic plan executed by students over the past six years to move the club from a group of individual hobbyists to a competitive team.

**Jay Krebs**, a fifth-year aerospace engineering student who serves as Lead Rocketry for WMU’s American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics chapter of which the group is a part, says early in the club’s history members worked separately to build rockets from kits. Now, they work together to build one rocket from individual parts using knowledge learned in the classroom.

“We’re now building from scratch instead of from a kit and applying engineering principles,” Krebs says. The transition is exciting for Krebs. “I like the opportunities it provides. It’s exciting to talk about what we do.”

Krebs and his teammates are talking a lot these days. At least twice a week, they gather to design their mission system, which will include a rocket, a parachute recovery system, and a payload system. The goal of this year’s NASA mission, ”Lunar Ice Recovery,” is to launch a rocket to a target altitude – between 3,500 and 5,500 feet. The team will deploy a mission vehicle that will be capable of navigating to target drill sites, drill 10 milliliters of simulated lunar ice from two inches below the surface and drive 10-linear feet carrying the simulated ice sample.

With their initial plans in place, competition rules require teams to test a small-scale model of their rocket and report findings to NASA. After the team’s test launch—tentatively scheduled for December or early January—they will incorporate the lessons learned into their final design. They will begin building the competition rocket in early 2020 and launch it in the April contest.
PROVING AEROSPACE ENGINEERING KNOWLEDGE

For the club to become a competitive team, members needed to earn the National Association of Rocketry’s advanced Level 2 certification. To earn Level 2 certification, candidates must build and fly a rocket that includes a recovery system and pass a safety inspection, including a written multiple-choice test with technical questions. Once they pass the safety inspection, they launch the rocket for certification team members who judge its stability and the deployment of the recovery system. After being safely recovered, the rocket must pass a post-flight safety inspection. Three club members went through the process, earning Level 2 certification.

With their advanced certifications in hand, the club entered the Argonia Cup Collegiate Rocketry Competition in the spring of 2019, where their rocket performed well. A good result in the Argonia competition provided club members with the confidence to aim for the highest rocket competition available to students: the NASA Student Launch.

Jay Krebs and Rachel Cavan work on the rocket’s electrical components.

Club members are thrilled to be one of only 42 college teams accepted into the NASA Student Launch competition and are now applying engineering knowledge learned in the classroom to navigate the contest’s rigorous requirements. Alexis Lind, who grew up dreaming of launching rockets, says the group is incorporating lessons learned at last year’s Argonia Cup competition into this year’s mission system. “This year is more intense because, last year, we only had to launch the rocket to a certain height and then land it within a certain radius,” Lind says. “This year after landing it, the rover has to drive around and collect ‘ice’ (sand) and get to a checkpoint in order to complete our mission.”

Fifth-year aerospace engineering student Nate Kueterman agrees that this year’s mission is more challenging.
“As a first-year team (in the NASA competition), it’s hard because there’s no frame of reference for what you’re trying to accomplish,” Kueterman says. “We’re interpreting what other teams have done and doing it our own way. Each year it will get easier but, when you’re creating the process, anything can happen.”

FOLLOW THE TEAM’S PROGRESS
WMU’s Advanced Rocketry Club is documenting its journey to the NASA Student Launch competition on its website as well as Instagram and Facebook.

WMU alumna's personal experience will drive national strategy to combat human trafficking

Contact: Erin Flynn
December 4, 2019

Hounakey
WASHINGTON, D.C.—A Western Michigan University alumna is on the frontlines of combating human trafficking nationwide. President Donald Trump appointed Bella Hounakey to the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking.

"It's an honor to serve not just our country, but to also be part of a bigger system that is working on behalf of vulnerable populations," says Hounakey, a Seita Scholar who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees from WMU.

An advocate for refugee and foster children at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, Hounakey knows firsthand the horrors of trafficking. She was just 9 years old when her dreams of a better life in the United States were shattered by a trusted relative.

A BETRAYAL OF TRUST
Hounakey grew up in the West African country of Togo, where becoming a lawyer was more a daydream than a realistic goal for a young girl.

"My biological parents knew the community in which I was being raised didn't have the resources to get where I wanted to be," remembers Hounakey.

But her aunt—a confidant who introduced her to the Christian faith and often had her over for visits—offered her hope.

"She understood that I wanted a better education," Hounakey says. "When she came by and said that she saw potential in me and she wanted me to come with her to the United States, my parents sent me without question."

So she traveled to her aunt's house, two hours from her hometown in Togo. She anxiously waited four months until it was time to travel to her new life in the United States. Along with seven other girls related to her aunt through marriage, she boarded a plane to New Jersey.
Her aunt had a house in Newark—a seven-bedroom estate in a prominent neighborhood, something Hounakey had only seen on TV before. But the fairy tale came to an abrupt halt when she walked through the doors.

"When we arrived, there were 22 girls in the house," says Hounakey, who recalls sleeping with up to ten girls in a room. "That's where the horror started. We were working about 18 hours a day. We were just working robots."

Hounakey's aunt owned a hair salon where the girls were held as slaves in plain sight, working all day long creating intricate braids for customers. Each girl was given a false identity; the aunt would wake the girls up in the middle of the night to learn a script.

"We were children, so in order to live in the false identity that (my aunt) had assigned us, we had to practice," Hounakey says. "So, if you came across me at the salon and would ask, 'You're so young, why are you working here and why are you not in school?' we would have answers for you. We literally worked so hard to live a false life."

FINDING HOPE

Hounakey spent several hours every day braiding hair in a salon for no pay.

While the salon was like a prison, the house the girls stayed in was no better.

"You would think it was the braiding that was making (my aunt) money, but it was actually sex trafficking that was making her money."

For five years, Hounakey lived a nightmare.

"Hope is the worst thing to lose, because at that point you are not sure if there's any gateway for you," she says. "I never thought I would get a second chance. I never thought that I would be in the situation I am today."

She often fantasized about her freedom.
"I used to do this lady's hair," recalls Hounakey. "I did her hair for two years at the salon. She came the same time every single month, and I would look at her and just wanted her to know that I was in pain. She never really asked me questions.

"I was so upset at her because every month when she came, I would say, 'This month she's going to know that something's wrong and take me with her.' But she didn't. I wanted her to be this savior, and I was so angry at her."

On an early morning in November 2007, though, that changed. Hounakey and the other girls woke up to police and FBI agents in their house, helicopters circling overhead. Finally—a light at the end of the tunnel.

Hounakey and the other survivors who were still minors were placed into the foster system in Michigan while the case against her captors worked its way through the court system. And it turns out, the woman she longed to save her played a key role in their rescue.

"She was actually working for the FBI and helping with the investigation," Hounakey says. "She told me in court, 'I wanted to take you every single time I came, but if I did, we wouldn't have saved everybody.'"

**A NEW LIFE**

Hounakey earned bachelor's degrees from WMU in criminal justice and Spanish in 2015.
At 14 years old, five years after watching the door slam shut on her dreams of a better life, Hounakey finally had hope.

"I was highly thankful for the people of Michigan, because for the first time there were people that helped me without condition," she says.

While she was free from the shackles of modern-day slavery, however, the trauma of five years of torture remained.

Because of behavioral issues, Hounakey was in and out of foster care homes and juvenile detention centers.

Eventually she found support at a home in Grand Rapids and also reconnected with her faith. Hounakey found her stride and graduated high school, earning acceptance to WMU as a Seita Scholar, which supports students who have lived some or all of their teenage years in foster care.

"When I came to college, I left a community where I had support in my foster home with my mother, Laura Carpenter, but I was entering another community on campus where we shared the same struggles," Hounakey says. "I needed continued support … with Western, there was a whole community."

Seita Scholars receive academic, career, financial and personal support throughout their time at WMU. Nationwide, fewer than 3% of foster youth graduate from a 4-year college. Since the launch of the program in 2008, graduation rates for Seita Scholars have far exceeded the national average.

Hounakey considers Mark Delorey, right, who helped develop the Seita Scholars program, her "forever father."

"I had a choice between Western and University of Michigan, and I'm very proud to be a Bronco alumni. I wouldn't have gotten this far if I didn't go to Western because of the community that's
there," says Hounakey, emphasizing the University's focus on inclusivity in education, especially for vulnerable student populations.

"WMU makes sure they have the tools, they have the support, and they have the community they need in order to thrive instead of survive."

Indeed, Hounakey thrived at WMU—in part because of the care of Mark Delorey, who helped create the Seita Scholars program and now serves as a Foundation Scholars advisor.

"Mark is my forever father. He welcomed us. He assisted me in going to Spain. He wanted to make sure that I didn't miss out on any opportunities," says Hounakey. "I now speak five languages. He wanted me to pursue all my dreams."

MISSION TO HELP
After earning bachelor's degrees in criminal justice and Spanish and a master's degree in social work, Hounakey is fulfilling that mission—advocating for the vulnerable and using her second chance to save lives.

"I had a professor in graduate school who would tell us, 'Do you want to be complacent, get an office job and work until you die, or do you want to make a difference?' And that was very motivating for me. I remind myself every day to not be complacent. People are depending on me to make a change."

Hounakey's appointment to the advisory council will last two years. During that time, she will draw on her experience to evaluate policies of government agencies and help them develop strategies to create awareness, prevent and root out human trafficking, as well as provide services to survivors.

"I feel that there's a great deal of responsibility to do better and become better for (victims)," she says. "Somebody somewhere is isolated and is experiencing the same horror as I did. I'm hoping that they could use me as a source of hope."