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State of the University 2017

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State of the University 2017



Opening

Good morning and thank you all for being here this morning to celebrate the very best of Western Michigan University—teaching, research, service, discovery and creative activities.

You can't imagine how gratifying it is to be serving as the new president of this University and have the good fortune to read about and listen to the outstanding achievements of the 13 faculty and staff members who have earned this year's campuswide honors.

Please join me in acknowledging their accomplishments and service with one more round of applause.

The State of the University

Listening to the narratives about our award winners should serve as a reminder of what makes Western Michigan University such a special place. Yes, we are a learner centered, discovery driven, globally engaged, comprehensive University. Yes, we have hundreds of programs and countless activities to excite the mind and indulge the passions. But our special sauce is our people. It's the faculty and staff that can be found in every unit, department, office and facility who have given this University its well-deserved national reputation. Look at their accomplishments, listen to their stories and those of countless others across this campus. Hear

what our students and alumni say about their experience here. About how they were embraced and pushed, supported and challenged, given a helping hand— but not a handout — every day in thousands of ways, and you will come away with but one conclusion:

The state of Western Michigan University is strong, healthy, vibrant and bursting with potential.

We have a 114-year tradition of providing a high-quality educational experience for the sons and daughters of our state, region and the world. Of being a place where faculty and staff come to spend their careers and often maintain close connections even in retirement. Of being the creative and cultural center for the Kalamazoo region and for being the preferred higher education partner for nonprofits, local governments, schools and numerous businesses.

Impact. That's been our goal. **Impact.** That's been our reality. Because of that we have every right to be proud. Let me give you just a few recent examples of our impact on our students and our community.

- **Newell Brands**, our strong industry partner at the Business Technology and Research Park, has reveled in the success of its product design center and has hired our graduates, recruited WMU interns, undertaken research with us and strongly supported our new Product Design and Innovation program. The company announced last week it would invest \$7.3 million, with \$1.48 million from the state, to expand the design center, a move that will create an additional 60 to 90 high-end jobs over the next three years.
- Our student athletes set the bar high for academic achievement. They were recognized for having the **highest overall institutional grade-point average** for student athletes competing in the Mid-American Conference during the 2016-17 academic year. WMU received the **MAC Institutional Academic Achievement Award for posting an overall GPA of 3.253 for the past academic year based on almost 400 students in 15 MAC sports**. This marks the first time WMU has earned this prestigious honor, and comes at the same time WMU is receiving another award for having the **highest GPA among male student athletes**.
- As we speak, voting is going on in the Grand Rapids ArtPrize competition. The WMU-Grand Rapids Downtown location was named among this year's five finalists for the Grand Rapids ArtPrize outstanding venue juried category award. The exhibit was curated by the Frostic School of Art and features the work of several of our faculty and student artists. Our featured exhibit "Red Dirt Rug Monument" by Rena Detrixhe is 100 square feet in size and is an ArtPrize finalist among both jurors and patrons.
- And finally, in the category of breaking news, WMU researchers have just garnered one of the largest single research grants in University history. Drs. Patricia Reeves and Jianping Shen in our Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology have been awarded a \$12.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education for their "High Impact Leadership for School Renewal Project." They'll use the funding over the next couple of years to work with leadership teams—principals and aspiring principals—at up to 150 high-need schools in our communities. These researchers are not alone in their accomplishments, and we'll talk more about them as we go along, but the bottom line is that in all of our departments and all of our areas, we have sterling examples of incredible accomplishment going on just at this very moment.

Over the past years, you have no doubt seen and heard many other "good news" stories that reflect the kind of success and impact that this institution has enjoyed. We must lift up these stories and get the word out both within our community and in the broader world.

I need your help in this process, as you know firsthand where and how we are having an impact. You know which of your colleagues have received NSF Young Investigator awards, put on prize-winning performances or been named fellows of their professional societies. You know what recognitions our students have received and how they are having a real impact in the classroom, on campus and in the community. You know how our staff are going the extra mile and creating opportunity. You know how your programs are ranked and what milestones they have passed. Each of these are points of pride. Let's shine our light. We have a great story to tell.

But, if I may, I would like to paraphrase a line from an old boss of mine, former President Obama, in a State of the Union address in which he said, "It's tempting to look back on these moments and assume that our progress was inevitable"—that WMU was always destined to succeed (That's why it's paraphrased). Just as there was nothing inevitable about our past success, there is nothing guaranteed about our future. Western was created, grew and has prospered because the people who worked here and the community where we were born made conscious choices to move forward together. We adapted to Great Depressions and Great Wars. We embraced Civil Rights and Women's Rights. We lived through Univacs and PCs and iPhones. We've seen the Greatest Generation, the Baby Boomers and now, Millennials. We have moved forward. We have made an impact through all of them.

However, our past does not determine our future. Our world is continually changing and to keep pace—let alone move forward—requires us to **adapt**. We must continually reexamine our priorities, how we operate and where we invest our resources. We must not only look inward, **we must look outward to see how the environment is shifting and where new opportunities and challenges lie ahead.** Higher education is facing some real challenges. Shifting funding has brought new worries to research institutions and particularly to public higher education. Shifting population patterns and emerging local competitors matter in ways they did not just a decade ago.

That doesn't mean we need to follow every trend, fad or viral moment. It **does** mean that we can't take our success for granted. Talking to all of you, engaging with our community, looking at our strategic plan and—not surprisingly, given the fact that I am an economist—looking over data, it has become apparent that we face some critical challenges. If we ignore these challenges we won't just stay still, we will actually fall behind. The good news about these challenges is they also represent transformative opportunities. If we act smartly, if we act now, if we act together to meet them head on and focus the incredible talent of the people of this University on them we can put this University on a new higher future trajectory, and we can do it while staying true to our core values and what has made this a special place to learn and work.

I put in the following buckets: **student success, diversification of funding, and being the school of choice for this region.** Success in these three areas will lay the foundation for our path forward. The good news is that we have had pockets of success in each of these areas, based on our work in the past. Our challenge is to take these pockets of success and take them to scale and

make those improvements permanent and institutionalized. To do that **will mean thinking differently about how we operate at every level and in every unit.**

1. Improving retention and graduation rates

Let's look at retention and graduation rates. We have as a University community made a commitment to being an institution that offers access and opportunity to all students with the potential to succeed. Not only do our students come from a wealth of backgrounds, but they also come to us with a variety of academic credentials and levels of preparation. Our diversity along so many dimensions is one of our greatest strengths. Indeed alumni have told me over and over again that Western Michigan—sometimes alone—gave them a chance, and that they were able to succeed when they found a fellow student, a faculty member, advisor, or program that offered them the support and encouragement they needed.

But our second-year retention rate and our six-year graduation rate have been firmly fixed in what is an "average" category for colleges and universities. But we are not an average **University. That is not our expectation. That is not our goal. We are an exceptional University. A six-year graduation rate of 54 percent is simply not good enough!**

We have a responsibility to partner with every student we admit to assure them of a viable path to success here—to make sure their journey to a degree doesn't take seven, eight, nine or more years. And, we do not accept the fact that 4 out of 10 who we admit in the fall will not get a degree at Western. But the good news is we know how to do this. Across the campus we have initiatives that have proven to enhance student success. They work for targeted populations. We've got to take it to scale.

Our student-athletes and our Martin Luther King Academy students, as just two examples, have six-year graduation rates of 67 percent—**a full 13 percentage points above our University average.** I see no reason why that shouldn't be our goal for all of our students. An 80-percent first-year retention rate and a 67-percent, six-year graduation rate would place us fourth among our 23 peers—near the very top—and tied for third in the MAC, with schools that take a very different profile of student.

If we can complete the cycle and find ways to take our current initiatives to scale, we can meet that goal. Our success in doing so will be good for students and good for the University. If we refine those initiatives here and distribute them widely, they also have the potential to have a broader national impact, potentially positioning our University as an acknowledged leader in the arena of student success—a University that becomes a leader in student success not by excluding people or by becoming an elitist playground, but by giving people a **real** chance and helping them succeed.

Just look at a couple of examples we're running every day.

- Our celebrated **Seita Scholars Program**, for instance, is one of five national finalists for **APLU's Degree-Completion honors in November.** Nationally, we know that fewer than 10 percent of students who age out of foster care attend college, and only about 3

percent ever earn a degree. At WMU and because of our Seita Scholars Program for former foster-care youth, that degree completion rate is **13 times** the national average—a phenomenal rate of improvement. It works by bringing together scholarships, campus coaches, mentors, a support network and year-round campus housing that are all part of the elements of success. You have to think holistically. They have done it.

- Our Broncos First learning communities began as an effort led by Drs. Andrea Beach and Charles Henderson, to uncover the barriers to success that exist for Kalamazoo Promise students. Their efforts are giving us an important laboratory for examining and developing a framework for addressing the hurdles that still exist for students even when a significant portion of the cost of higher education is no longer a barrier. While the share of Promise-eligible high school grads who earn a bachelor's degree within six years has risen by 7 percentage points over the decade since the Promise was launched, improvements still need to be made, and our work here may well set the stage for the future success of Promise students and many other students.
- Our College of Engineering and Applied Sciences and Division of Student Affairs have made a conscious effort to engage new students by implementing a STEP program and engineering learning communities to provide interventions for students who underperform in early STEM courses. They provide counseling, tutoring and career preparation. The STEP initiative has resulted in a **31 percent** increase in graduation rates in engineering disciplines served.
- Two members of the College of Arts and Science Leadership team and members of the college faculty—**Drs. Keith Hearit and Sherine Obare**—examined their college's introductory courses in STEM disciplines like chemistry and mathematics to determine what interventions could boost the number of successful outcomes and keep students on the pathway to success. They wanted to assure our courses provide a pathway into a discipline—not a barrier to keeping people out. The work is part of a national Gateways to Completion movement sponsored by the Gardiner Institute utilizing class learning assistants and a more engaged and supportive classroom environment. Again, the initial results at WMU show **double-digit percentage** increases in student success and higher retention for students.

Efforts like these and others across the campus have left us with a wealth of data. It's time now for us to take the next step and figure out what parts of such successful interventions that are working in different parts of the University can be applied to other areas to keep students engaged in engineering and English and health studies. We need to reach across the disciplines, to join academic affairs with student affairs, to rethink our policies and our practices that touch student lives inside and outside the classroom and shape their experiences here. Only by getting out of the normal silos will we find ways to scale what we've learned to the benefit of our entire student body.

Fortunately, there are models, both on our campus and at other institutions, of successful student retention initiatives. Georgia State University, for instance, has become the poster child for enhancing student success. Our colleagues there raised their six-year graduation rate by 22 percentage points over the past five years. They've reduced time to degree by an average of half a semester, and saved their students \$15 million annually in debt payments. And they haven't changed the profile and access of their student body.

Playing into the retention and completion equation on this campus will be the WMU Signature program, allowing students to blend their passions and their academic work in a way that will give them a unique degree and set of credentials to take with them into the workforce. Students who are excited about their experience, stay.

The work on that program will be complemented by the work of our Faculty Senate, which is developing a new Essential Studies curriculum. It will breathe new relevance into our students' basic education. Students who come and in their first two years are motivated and their minds are opened will stay. They will not only be successful in their major areas of study, but also in their preparation for civic life. Our students are developing into individuals with a broad range of knowledge, and are more likely to enjoy a fulfilling personal AND professional life. I commend the Senate for this important work. We want our general education curriculum to be broad, inclusive and focused on the traits that will position our students for success throughout their lifetime. As journalist Fareed Zakaria noted in his book "In Defense of Liberal Education,"

"Liberal education should give people the skills that will help them get ready for their sixth job, not their first job."

The WMU Essential Studies curriculum and the Signature program reaffirm our legacy and our commitment to continual improvement and reinvention. Updated curricula, strong support mechanisms and a campus culture focused on student success will change our retention and degree completion rates and solidify our leadership position as a school committed to access and opportunity—and we'll do it the right way.

2. Diversifying our revenue stream

The second challenge is that the cost of higher education continues to fall disproportionately on the families we serve, as tuition makes up two-thirds of our revenue. The vast majority of the other third comes from our state appropriation. Only 3 percent of our revenue comes from gifts, and 4 percent comes from contracts or grants. We cannot continue to rely solely on tuition and the state, especially if we are to remain accessible to the sons and daughters of families of average and below-average means. I am immensely proud of the fact that over the past decade we have actually increased the share of our students who come from households in the bottom 60 percent of the income distribution. This is happening while other research institutions have increased their share of students from the top 1 percent.

Moving forward we need to increase donor support, we need to leverage our research dollars to provide more student opportunity, and we need to look with real creativity at how our resources can be put to work in service of alternative types of education and professional development offerings. Fee-for-service programs in areas like leadership or human resources or government policy might help boost our financial resources without relying on tuition dollars or the taxpayers.

I just told you the news of a major new research grant from the Department of Education. That's just one of a series of grants that we have gotten over the course of this semester. We've gotten more than **\$20 million in grants since the start of this year**. Last year we did \$27 million in

total. We are well on our way. It is my belief that we can turn this great start to the fiscal year into a resurgence in our ability to capture funding for the important work we do here. We just completed a year with a grant total of \$27 million. My goal is to raise that to \$50 million. You might think, "He's dreaming," that it's a stretch. But let me remind you that less than a decade ago, our annual research dollars regularly exceeded \$40 million. So more than half of the goal is simply returning to our historic level—more than half. If you look at other institutions that are like us, institutions that are committed to a student-centered education but are also research institutions—Wayne State and UMBC—they have moved from a \$20 million research program to \$75 million over a twenty-year period. Critically, they have done it without losing their student-centered focus. I see no reason why we can't return to and surpass our levels of the past. It was comfortable turf for the WMU community once and could—indeed should—be again.

One of our critical constituencies includes our alumni base who are incredibly proud and satisfied with their WMU education and higher education experience. Somehow over the past few years, that pride has not translated into the financial support from alumni at a rate we once enjoyed and need to achieve again. Just **4 percent** of our alumni give annually. That giving rate ties us for ninth—near the bottom of all MAC schools and—harkens back to a day when people could count on the state government to provide all the money. But those days are not the reality for public institutions any more.

While private universities have always seen alumni as critical to their success, many public schools have done so, too. Among our peers, 33 percent of the University of Alabama alumni give each year, and at Miami of Ohio 20 percent give every year. While these may be the gold standard, at many peer institutions, it is not unusual to find annual alumni giving rates in the 7 to 11 percent range. Closer to home, Ball State and Akron have 9 or 10 percent of their alums giving on an annual basis. We used to have an annual alumni giving rate of 10 percent just six years ago. There is no reason we can't return to that neighborhood again and move beyond it

Our story and the University's **enormous potential** as a learning community will continue to be the prime messages in our alumni engagement efforts. Next week's WMU Giving Day as a part of our annual Homecoming celebration is a prime example of what will become commonplace in the future. We have to reach out more. We have to be purposeful.

3. Making WMU a University of Choice

The third challenge, or opportunity, is making ourselves the institution of choice for the region. By becoming the institution of choice for students, we would see more students from Michigan and the region want to come here. By becoming the institution of choice we would enhance our ability to attract and retain diverse and high-quality faculty and staff. By becoming the institution of choice, we would make WMU the preferred higher education partner for businesses, schools, governments and community organizations. There is no reason we should not be among the top 100 public universities in the country. There is no reason why "the big three" in this state is not UM, MSU and WMU.

As I laid out at the start of this talk, we have a lot of really impressive, remarkable things going on at WMU. We do have excellent faculty engaged in cutting edge research, performance and scholarship. We prepare our students for success in their careers and in life. While we must tell that story better, we can't just claim to be among the big three, we must show people we're in the big three or in the top tier. Our claims must match reality. Reality suggests that something is amiss. We see that when each year for nearly a decade, our enrollments have fallen. They've fallen at the same time, just up the road, there's a university competitor that has gone from a little over 3,000 to close to 20,000 students.

We shouldn't ignore the fact that high school counselors—many trained at this very University—share an opinion of us has been slowly edging downward, with the result being they are sending students elsewhere. We have to pay attention.

While US News rankings are far from perfect, we shouldn't pretend to be among the elite schools in the state and nation while our rankings have slowly declined from 173 to 208 this year. We are now tied with Central Michigan.

Let me be clear that becoming the institution of choice is **not** about climbing the rankings simply for the sake of climbing in the rankings. We become the institution of choice by being better at our core missions. If we look to continually improve, we will serve as the institution of choice, becoming a veritable magnet for students and the community. How will we know if we are succeeding? We will know we are succeeding when our graduation and retention rates are better, when more students are employed in their chosen fields and doing better in life and on the job, when alumni support and giving is higher, when external funding support is broader, internal morale is higher, and when the reputation of our programs individually, and of our university collectively, among peers and counselors has been enhanced.

If we focus our energy, talents and resources on doing these things, a byproduct will be upward movement in US News and other university ranking systems. We must do this without relying on gimmicks or schemes that are inconsistent with our core values and mission. We've made a conscious choice to be an opportunity University, to be an inclusive University, to be a global University. We **don't** want students only from a narrow strata. We want all of our students to have the opportunity to succeed. We don't want to shut ourselves off from our community but we do want to align our incredible capacity to teach and do research with emerging areas of need in the global community. This may not be the right path for every university, but WMU is **not** every university. **It is a special place.** We can do well by doing right. We can change the national perception of our institution by the choices we make and our focused attention on improving outcomes. Making our programs stronger, ensuring student success, increasing alumni engagement, and thinking outside the box when it comes to finding new funding streams will help us fulfill our mission to better serve our students, to attract a diverse student body, to enhance our research, scholarship and creative activities, and to engage globally.

We did make some real progress this year as seen by Business Insider magazine naming us among the nations the most affordable high-quality institutions. We also saw Washington Monthly rank us as one of the top 100 most impactful institutions. We see progress in our effort to become that school of choice for a diverse group of students, in terms of our enrollment

numbers. We saw a significant **25 percent** increase in our number of out-of-state U.S. students. Continuing that success is critical at a time when projections indicate we will see a 10 percent drop in the number of Michigan high school graduates by 2025.

We managed to stay nearly even in our number of international students, even as schools around the nation were seeing double-digit losses. And, most important, we had the **largest class of beginning students in a long time—nearly 3,200 of them**. It's a good start and **we must continue and build that momentum**. I have asked each vice president to identify low hanging fruit in their areas where we can begin to improve this year. They have proposed to make improvements in areas ranging from retention, diversity and inclusion, and financial aid, to infrastructure improvements, enhancing morale and long-range budgeting and planning. Join me in also focusing our attention on these three areas for transformative action.

Institutional transformation

These three broad goals—improving student success, diversifying our revenue sources and becoming a school of choice—are important goals, critical goals. I want to ensure we put the best thinking from every corner of the campus to work in achieving them. People at every level and in every department or unit may well have ideas that will help us achieve one or more of these goals.

To encourage people to come together, collaborate and develop those good ideas I know are out there, I'm announcing, today, a [WMU Transformational Initiative Fund](#). The \$1 million available will be awarded for collaborative initiatives aimed at transformational work that will significantly impact one or more of those three goals. We're looking for "big picture" ideas and initiatives that will spark institutional change with the potential to have a significant impact on one or more of the goals I've just outlined. Preference will be given to initiatives that cut across departmental boundaries, and the successful proposals will need to have the support of their areas. By having that support and leveraging matching funds and contributions, we'll have the potential to invest \$2 million in these strategic initiatives. It's a start.

This was not conceived as a 35-year process. We are setting an early November proposal deadline and are committed to announcing the winning proposals by early January. Why? Because time is of the essence—we need to create momentum and want to start making progress. Let's join together and act. Everything we try may not succeed, but it's time we took back our own destiny. In the coming days, all campus employees will receive more details on this initiative. I encourage you to think about it and participate. Ideas that come from the bottom up are the best ideas. You know how to do this. We need your talent. We need your buy-in.

Closing

I've just laid out a call for change with some tangible goals and the measurable results we're after—better graduation rates, more financial resources, and enhanced enrollment and improved community engagement. While some of what I said may be depressing to some. I want to close by telling you I am excited about the future of this University. The more people I meet, the more

I learn about our history and tradition, the prouder I am to be a Bronco because of our shared commitment to being a haven for students and a place where all students know we've have their back.

We have a tradition of being a place where that happens—a place where a student's years here leave a lasting imprint. It began with our first president, Dwight Waldo, who wanted to prepare teachers to help both urban and rural children. To reach all students he recognized he need teachers who looked like them so he admitted minority students when many other Michigan institutions left them behind. Our commitment to diversity and inclusion has strengthened over the years. It is rooted in our desire to have a real impact on our students lives and our community. To truly be a place where all may learn. Together we can continue to make an enormous difference in the lives of our students. It's a choice we must make as a campus community.

As William Jennings Bryan once opined, "Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."

Events over the past two weeks have provided us wonderful illustrations of what success might look like and what the stakes are in terms of the difference we make in students' lives. Last week's Hall-Archer-Pickard Residence Halls naming ceremony reminded us of the enduring strength of the bonds students establish during their undergraduate years. Ron Hall Sr., Dennis Archer and William Pickard were students here more than 50 years ago. The friendship they began then and the education they received here has had a lasting impact over five decades. What began here not only had an impact on the lives of those three men, but it also affected the path of our state, its largest city and the direction of this campus community.

Even as we celebrated the lives of those three men, we learned of the death of legendary track and cross-country Coach George Dales, who was the most successful coach in WMU athletic history. Speaking of his WMU teammates, Olympic champion Ira Murchison noted Dales, "was like a father to us." On the evening of his death last week at age 96, he was still regularly talking with his athletes, including one who had been a cross country runner some 52 years ago and had a lengthy conversation with "Coach" just hours before Dales' death. The impact that Dales had on his teams and the life lessons he imparted as he took on schools that refused to treat black athletes with dignity remained with his athletes all these decades later.

Some of the challenges students face may have changed since the 1960s, but our commitment must remain the same. We are stronger when we stand together against injustice of any form. We are wiser when ideas are civilly shared and debated. We are richer when opportunities are freely given.

Thank you for all that you do every day for our students and our community. And thank you, in advance for the achievements still to come.

Dr. Edward Montgomery
President of Western Michigan University