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Inaugural Address, John M. Dunn

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Western Michigan University

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President John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University
Inaugural Address
March 24, 2008

Welcome

Thank you!

Wow, what a wonderful celebration. I must note special appreciation to those here on the stage with me this afternoon. Senator George and Mayors Hopewell and Strazdas, thank you for the kind words. To our student leaders, Chris Praedel and Rosana Alsaud, our faculty leaders Mary Lagerway and Paul Wilson and employee group leaders Wil Emmert and Carrie Soule, I must say I am humbled by your support and good wishes. Diether Haenicke, it is always a pleasure to hear you speak--and the pleasure is multiplied by the kind and personal nature of your remarks. And to Trustee Ken Miller, I must say thank you for your leadership, support and counsel, and for your willingness to moderate today's celebration.

Thank you, too, to the members of the WMU Board of Trustees here with us today. Your support over the past eight months has been remarkable. Thank you, also, to the Trustees Emeriti with us. Your presence is an affirmation of your longtime support. And to Senators Cameron Brown and Ron Jelinek and to Representatives Joan Bauer, Jack Hoogendyk, Ron Jelinek, Robert Jones, and John Proos, thank you for your presence and participation in today's event. Let me also pay special tribute to Betty Kocher, Professor Terry Williams and the many others who planned today's event. Your special attention to the large and small details is evident. And to the talented students and faculty performing this afternoon, there is but one thing to say: you fill me with pride.

To everyone gathered here today—thank you. Your presence makes this event particularly joyous. This celebration, while it is called an inauguration, is really about our University and the great accomplishments that occur daily on this campus. I'll talk more and with great specificity about those in a moment, but I want to begin by recognizing some important members of today's audience.

This is a University with outstanding and nationally acclaimed faculty. Would the faculty members in attendance today, please rise and be acknowledged? Now I'd like to ask our University staff, members of the administration, chairs and deans, all who play pivotal roles of supporting the enterprise to please stand. And, of course, a university cannot be a university without students; an event of this nature cannot be a moment of celebration without students. Would our students please stand. You remind us each and every day that our future is indeed bright. Thank you.

I also extend deep appreciation to my fellow Michigan presidents and representatives of Michigan and other universities throughout the United States. Thank you for "taking time" from your many other responsibilities to be here with us today.

Before I continue further, please help me to acknowledge some people very special to me on a personal level. We all know that one's successes are directly attributable to others – those who have been there through the years to support, to console, and to be a barometer so that all things are placed in perspective. First, my wife of 36 years--Linda. Thank you for all that you have done to help our family and me. Without you, today would not have occurred.

Because our children have an outstanding mother, they have developed into marvelous adults that anyone, anywhere would be proud to call sons and daughter. First, the oldest, Matthew and his wife Lesley; Michael, our second born; and their younger sister, Kerry. You are a huge part of this event today. Thank you for your support and sacrifices.

We have other family members here with us. First, Linda's mother Rita, her sister Melissa, her uncle Chuck, and her cousin Jeanne. We are deeply honored that you would travel from the great Northwest to be here today.

I am also very proud that my sister, Fran, and her children Cindy and Bob and their spouses Jim and Avonda are here. If anyone wants to know the rest of the story, talk to my sister. Fran is a bit older and I am very fortunate to have benefited throughout my life from her affection and support. And, the family introductions would not be complete without acknowledging my uncle, Hubie Dunn, who, since early in my life, has served as a mentor and inspiration. Uncle Hubie is here today with one of his daughters, Cathy.

There are other family members who have passed from this earth and are with us today in memory. These include my mother and father. I would like to pay special tribute to Mom, my first teacher, one of life's unheralded people, who worked hard, sometimes holding three jobs, so that her children had food, clothing and shelter. This day is dedicated to her memory.

Planning and preparation

I am not accustomed to giving inaugural addresses. On a very personal level, this is an auspicious occasion. It is a signature moment in my life and one that makes me both proud and humble. For those reasons, I struggled, initially, to develop the message I want to share with you. I was struck with the thought that my words should be profound, deep, meaningful, and inspirational. My life, however, was indelibly shaped by my small-town upbringing and some very simple messages learned early in life that have served me well.

Let me tell you a story that early on helped shape me. As a young boy and later as a high school student, I had many jobs. I worked as a paperboy, mowed lawns, caddied, worked in a movie theatre, and later was a filling station attendant. In the latter role, I worked at a full-service filling station. We not only pumped the gas, but we checked the oil, tire pressure, washed the windows and offered to vacuum the car. The old days are not all bad! The first customer I waited on taught me a lesson that I have never forgotten. I was proud of my training and my uniform, and I was ready to serve our customers. The first individual I waited on was Carl, who ran the local liquor store. He drove a new and nice

Pontiac. As he entered the gas station, I met and greeted him, took his order, pumped the right amount of gas, washed the windows, checked the tire pressure and eventually took his money and provided change. After thanking him for his business, I turned to go back to the station, proud that I had served my first customer successfully. But as I took a couple of steps, I heard a loud noise—clang, clang. I turned around and to my horror I discovered that I had forgotten to remove the nozzle from the car. Not good! Carl stopped his car, looked at the side of his car, looked at me, looked again at the side of his car – and while I was apologizing profusely, said to me, "That'll happen!"

I have carried that early lesson with me throughout life—sometimes despite the best of efforts, things happen. People make mistakes and leaders need to be able to assess intentions and deal with the results when things simply happen. Intense and careful preparation is only part of the equation.

As I reflected on that lesson and struggled with my inaugural message, I realized today is not about me. It is about our University—what our University is today and what we want it to be tomorrow. It is about intentions and outcomes. It is about careful planning and preparation. But it is also about being flexible and ready to change should the situation require it. And, when we err, it is about being willing to recognize and apologize for that error.

The University today

Where we are as a university today and what we will achieve tomorrow are the products of traits we already hold dear—overarching attributes around which this University was built and around which we still can and should model our future.

Simply put, this is a University that at its core is compassionate, dedicated to civility and committed to building character. And it is a University community that is never, ever complacent. These are the qualities that attracted me during my first encounters with this University, because they are the qualities upon which I have built my career.

My role today is twofold—to honor the institution that Western Michigan University has become, and to make a personal commitment to all of you about my intentions for the future. This is it:

Mine will be a presidency that celebrates and extends this University's values and accomplishments, and it will also be a presidency that embraces opportunity. Any opportunity to expand our reach and enhance our students' success will have my undivided attention.

WMU's accomplishments are many. It has become my practice over the past eight months to spend a few minutes setting the stage whenever and wherever I speak. For those of you who are guests and not intimately acquainted with WMU, I need to share a few facts. For those of you who are members of the University community, just sit back and enjoy the reminders of who and what we are and what you have accomplished.

- We are classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as one of the 199 comprehensive research universities in the United States. And we can lay claim without inhibition to being one of the top 100 public research universities in the nation. Western Michigan University is only one of 97 public research universities that have the intellectual capital to serve as a home to a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.
- Our University has produced more than 170,000 alumni, 111,000 of whom work and reside in Michigan. However, you can go to any corner of the earth and find a Bronco making significant contributions to society.
- Our academic programs—240 programs in all—are delivered and sustained by a distinguished and award-winning faculty. Several of our programs are ranked among the finest offerings of their kind in the nation. The list is long and includes programs in aviation, engineering, business, fine arts, humanities, the sciences, education, and health sciences. Our reputation is the envy of many other universities.
- Western Michigan University is home to one of the oldest and finest honors colleges in the United States, the Lee Honors College. The students enrolled in our Honors College, over 1,000 strong, have credentials that equal or surpass those of students from the most prestigious private colleges in the nation.

In short, this is an institution with tradition and a wonderful history, and it is still a work in progress. Those of you who have had an opportunity to look through this afternoon's program may have noticed a passage explaining the University seal. The focal point of that seal is a tree that has its roots firmly planted in the past but is still growing.

That past—the period in which we are rooted—stretches from 1903 to the present. It includes a tradition of outstanding presidents, upon whose accomplishments I am honored to build. One of them is here with us today, President Emeritus Diether H. Haenicke, our fifth president. I see his presence here today as a personal compliment and as an indication of his continuing commitment to this University. I am pleased that Diether will be close at hand for future interactions and counsel, because, as a University community we have much to do. We need to listen and learn from the wisdom of others—certainly from those who have led and taught before us, but also from those who are new to our community and full of fresh insights and untried ideas.

A shared vision for growth

You came here today to hear about the future direction of this University and my commitment to that future. But such a message would be incomplete without the input of members of this community.

Any vision is limited unless it is truly a shared vision. To this end, I have asked our Faculty Senate, our deans and chairs to provide input on our collaborative efforts to chart the course for WMU. We agree that we must continually examine, define more precisely and validate our core values.

Our overall goal is clear. Our history of growth, expansion, sustained academic excellence and commitment to student success must be preserved. We cannot and must not remain stagnant. We cannot be intimidated by cyclical economic challenges. The price of doing so--lost momentum and missed opportunities--is too great in this competitive environment. Those who came before us did not flinch in the face of challenge, and neither will we.

This University will continue to grow. We are at a pivotal point. At this juncture, our past and the traditions we have built play a critical role in how our future will unfold.

This is a research University. Our capabilities in discovery and developing our disciplines know no boundaries and are without peer. We are a relatively young research university, however, and we have, with great determination, retained and celebrated our focus on undergraduate education. We have learned, in the past 25 years, that every advance in research and scholarship has meant a corresponding leap forward in our ability to help our students succeed. Many of our faculty have consciously chosen to come and build their careers here because they can both conduct research and embrace their desire to teach and create an environment where students can be successful.

Our dedication to both research and student success is what sets us apart and is, I believe, our path to the future. We have generations of alumni who celebrate their allegiance to a University where, as undergraduates, they enjoyed deep personal connections with faculty members—the kind of connections reserved for graduate students at most research institutions. We can honor and extend that tradition. It is built into our mission statement, and it is part of the very fabric of this University.

This is a research University where we measure our accomplishments not only by our scholarly achievement, but also by the impact we have on our students' success. This is a university where every decision we make must revolve around two simple questions:

- Will it improve the educational experience for our students?
- Will it enhance our academic reputation?

If the answer to either of those questions is yes, the decision might be a good one. If the answer to both those questions is yes, we should pull out all the stops to promote the idea.

The path forward

As we move forward and take advantage of opportunities, our focus must be on charting a path that makes our journey part of the accomplishment. Those institutional values I mentioned earlier will guide us.

When future generations remember our work here together, I want the traits they remember to be our commitment to character, civility and compassion. And I want them to remember our refusal to be complacent and our willingness to take well-examined risks and never give up.

Let me talk briefly about those traits.

Compassion. No university will truly be great unless it commits to and embraces a path in which all citizens are included. We must be vigilant to ensure that no segment of our society, regardless of means, race, gender, ethnicity or place of origin is excluded. Our recent commitment to provide an education and residence to one of society's often neglected segments, children in our foster care system, affirms that our pledge to be an inclusive institution is expanding and setting a pathway for others to follow.

We must also be compassionate and mindful of others as we utilize, safeguard and protect our natural resources. Our University's record and dedication to a sustainable environment is enviable, but we can do more. Our compassion, to a large extent, will be measured by our understanding and commitment to not only the here and now, but by our respect for the future and the environmental conditions that will be inherited by those who follow us.

Civility. Civil discourse, respect and integrity are the hallmarks of great universities. Those qualities have long been widely embraced and affirmed as essential core values for Western Michigan University. Our vow, however, is to practice civil discourse and respect in all formal and informal settings—from Faculty Senate debate to conversations with a colleague over coffee in the Bernhard Center. Our respect for others, their ideas and views become most critical at times when we differ. We can disagree and still do so in a manner that demonstrates the very best of civil behavior and discourse.

Our recent student-led initiative and discussion with the Board of Trustees on the living wage issue affirms that our dialogue can be thoughtful, reasonable, and respectful. It reflects another early lesson that has been affirmed throughout my career. Words have power and words chosen carefully can build bridges, while words chosen carelessly erect barriers.

A civil and respectful campus also recognizes the contributions of every one of its members. Whether we are members of the faculty, part of the clerical or technical support staff, groundskeepers, cooks or vice presidents, we have one core responsibility—educating the next generation of citizens. Every role is important.

Character. As an institution, we can model those traits to write large the kind of citizenship we want our students to embrace. I want this to be a university that shows character and one that encourages every member of our community to build character. This is not a departure from our past, but rather an embrace of what has worked so well for us.

We have learned that our alumni consistently rate their experiences at WMU as overwhelmingly positive. Most graduates view their alma mater positively, but for Bronco graduates, the numbers are off the scale. It is because, while we offer the resources of a large university, we have been able to retain the sense of individual connection so important to student development and, ultimately, so critical to our students' ability to integrate themselves into their professional and civic lives. We ask our students to excel academically and to model their behavior as a representative of our University community. We ask them to incorporate our commitment to compassion and civility in their own lives.

Our goals must be to not only continue to imbue our students with critical thinking and technical skills, but also to help them develop their innate talents, and encourage them to use their abilities in pursuit of professional success, personal fulfillment and civic engagement. We want them to be people of both accomplishment and character. We want them to live lives that reflect positively on their families, their communities and their university.

Our future as a University will be strengthened by the importance we place on helping our students serve others. Albert Schweitzer, a great humanitarian, philosopher and physician, upon reflecting on the future, commented that the only truly happy and productive people in the world would be those who learn to give. While there are venues, in which our students give of their time and talent, we do not have a systematic way of noting, nurturing and ensuring that all students have experiences in which they give to their community. We must do so.

We want our graduates viewed as not only bright, talented and well prepared, but also as people who understand and value the world and their role as change agents in fostering a responsive and caring society. Too often of late, we find ourselves examining the lost potential of gifted people who, in the words of one commentator, "have talents that took them to places their character couldn't keep them." That's not the outcome we expect for students here at Western Michigan University.

No room for complacency

There is one final area in which we must emulate those who came before us. We must not allow ourselves to be satisfied with the status quo. In these unsettling times, our choice is between complacency and risk. It's hardly a choice at all, though, for complacency can only signal retreat.

Our status as a research university conveys our faculty's commitment and responsibility to deliver the most important and up-to-date information to our students. There is great value in discovery for discovery sake, but our University has consistently worked to translate research into action that creates jobs and adds immeasurably to the economic stability of our region, state and nation. There is no research university in the state more committed to collaboration and teamwork with the private sector than Western Michigan

University. A short visit to our Business Technology and Research Park demonstrates clearly our unselfish effort to partner with others.

Our future is dependent upon our ability to continue to be flexible and responsive to the needs of our state and society. Recently, for example, we initiated a conversation about a medical school at Western Michigan University. The need is great, with both the nation and state projecting a significant and imminent shortage of physicians. Establishing a medical school is a huge undertaking. We will continue our due diligence with the recognition that all great things happen through partnerships built to share the risk and maximize the benefits. Our community is fortunate to be the home of two world-class hospitals and the expertise, counsel, and resources associated with both will be significant as we continue our dialogue.

Given our state's economic situation and a budget already stretched too thin, some have questioned the wisdom of expansion in any direction. The response is that we must be creative in identifying new resources. Our sustainability in the modern era of higher education will require greater reliance on partnerships with other public and private entities. Paraphrasing a quote from Mother Teresa--We have done so much, for so long, with so little, we are now qualified to do anything with nothing.

Our future as a university will also hinge to a great extent on our commitment to our status as an international university. We know that talent is without borders. The world is indeed flat, and our domestic students must be prepared to deal with global aspects inherent in their fields of study. We must have curricula that are international in scope, and we must welcome the world onto our campus. Our domestic students benefit when they study, live and eat with students from throughout the world. And our nation will reap the benefits for years to come when international students have the opportunity to study with us.

Closing

My commitment to the plans, needs and hopes just outlined is complete. I've become passionate about this University, and I relish the idea of being its champion around the state and nation. I am not above objecting—vehemently—when I think our University is being unfairly treated or overlooked. There's enough Irish in me to stand and fight, but enough respect for this great University's traditions to keep us out of trouble.

We will extend our reputation as a University of character, civility and compassion. Years from now, when our successors look back on this time, I hope they say we saw opportunity, and we seized it; we recognized need, and we filled it; we encountered challenges, and we rose to meet them.

Most important, when those who come after us look at what we have accomplished, I hope they say, "They sought out the unknown and they embraced and explored it. They made this University and the community a better place."

Thank you again for your attendance and participation today. I cannot begin to adequately express the enormous pride I feel for being asked to serve and lead this great University. The challenges ahead are daunting, but the opportunities are great.

Finally, in closing, I pledge to you that I will give my very best each and every day to serve this great University. As John Fitzgerald Kennedy once observed "we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them. " Let us begin.

Thank you!