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## Family support essential to a student's success

*By Diether Haenicke*  
*November 18, 2009*

I had dinner with two graduating seniors who, in a few days, would walk across the stage in Miller Auditorium to receive their bachelor's degrees. One of them, Vanessa Bodnar, had written a senior thesis titled, "The Use of Indomethacin to Prevent Heterotopic Ossification Following Operative Treatment of Acetabular Fractures." The other one, Michael Dozeman, would begin work for Stryker Instruments right after graduation. For his senior project he chose work on a "Memory Chip Emulator for Surgical Power Tools."

These are undergraduates, mind you. Had the dinner conversation focused on these student topics, it would have been very one-sided. But luckily, the dinner had a different purpose: The WMU Medallion Program had invited parents and sponsors to celebrate the young scholars who entered the program in 1997 and who would soon be graduated.

The Medallion Program is a remarkable WMU institution. Born about 20 years ago on President John Bernhard's watch, it attracts annually hundreds of gifted students who compete for the two dozen full-ride undergraduate scholarships, now each worth \$32,000. The scholarships are awarded strictly on merit. The selection committee tries to select those students who show the highest academic promise coupled with potential for leadership and a concern for social issues.

Anyone pessimistic about today's youths should have observed, as I did, these young men and women as they recalled their undergraduate experience at Western Michigan University. They represented the full range of academic majors: the hard sciences, the arts and humanities, but also engineering and education. I remembered many of the students from when I first welcomed them to the university in the fall of 1997. What a difference four years made! I particularly recall Mike Dozeman — whose scholarship bears Carol's and my name — then a lanky, semi-shy entering freshman and now a full-

grown, focused, worldly and confident young man ready for a professional career. He made us proud.

After dinner, the Medallion Scholars rose to take leave from their friends and their undergraduate years. They spoke about their academic fields, but mainly about friendships forged, frustrations encountered, the good times to be remembered, the occasional tears shed, the love received from family and friends and finally about the bittersweet joy of leaving and facing graduate or professional school or “real life” in the workplace.

The students encouraged one another to reach out to different people: for the wallflower to befriend the seemingly odd classmate with multiple body piercings and blue hair, for the artistic one to befriend the nerd. Others, mostly in theater, creative writing, or music, thanked their parents for having let them go their own unconventional ways and for allowing them a broad, “impractical,” liberal education. I was impressed by the students’ academic achievements, but I was touched by their caring for one another and by the unembarrassed expression of love for their families. Only the unbounded pride and fondness of their families matched the warmth with which the students spoke of parents, siblings and loved ones.

Here lies, in my opinion, a central aspect for all educational success. Without a loving family’s interest and its constant emotional support, few students succeed. Teachers are critical in a student’s advancement, no doubt, but they are only effective in partnership with the learner’s home environment. To succeed academically and to grow into a good, responsible adult, a student needs love and support from home. These students certainly all had the irreplaceable advantage.

After an evening like this one, I stop worrying — for a while at least — about the future. I look at these young people and know that our political, our social, our economic, and academic institutions will be in good hands.

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[mlive.com/kalamazoo](http://mlive.com/kalamazoo)*