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## 2018 State of the University Address

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*Western Michigan University*

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# 2018 State of the University Address



## GOOD MORNING

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It's great to be here with you all at the onset of this new academic year. It seems like just yesterday I was standing before you delivering my first State of the University address. My freshman year has flown by, and we have already passed several milestone moments in this 2018-19 academic year—move-in day, new student and faculty orientation, the Matriculation Ceremony, Bronco Bash, and so much more—have all marked the beginning of a new year. It's exciting and invigorating, a rebirth that we are able to experience on this campus as a new cohort of students, faculty and staff come onto the campus and the Bronco family.

Looking into the eyes of these new arrivals, seeing their excitement is like a jolt of adrenaline serving as a reminder of what a special place we have to work at. A place full of ideas, knowledge, discovery, creativity and possibilities. A place where lives are changed and potential is realized. Each year represents a fresh opportunity to make a difference. That's what we do, that's who we are, that's why we are a learner-centered, discovery-driven and globally engaged University. We exist, in the words of President Paul Sangren, "So that all may learn."

Today's Fall Convocation provides an opportunity to learn from and to laud the incredible work and accomplishments of our colleagues from across the University. As you have just heard, this year we have an outstanding group of award recipients. We're in awe of your talents and appreciative of the dedication and commitment each of you have made every day here at WMU. You have each personified what it means to go above and beyond in your efforts. Because of you, our students are a little wiser, our campus a little richer and our community, a lot stronger. Today's formal recognition of your efforts and the admiration of your peers and coworkers is so richly deserved. All I can add is thank you.

I want to take a moment to also pause and acknowledge one of our award winners who is not with us today. Michael Braun was the recipient of this year's distinguished teaching award. We are saddened and mourn his loss, and we celebrate his commitment to the academy, his students, and the profession. We often refer to our faculty as "the heart" of the institution. Michael's

passion for teaching and his students enabled him to touch so many lives, to make studying and working here a special experience, and by so doing, he truly embodied this sentiment. Please join me in honoring Michael and all our award winners with one more round of applause.

So, a year ago, I stood before you and declared that the state of our university was strong, but that our past success did not guarantee our future; we needed to continually re-examine what we do and how we operate; and we needed to come together around efforts to promote student success, diversify our funding and become the school of choice for this region. Well, in the immortal words of Jim Croce, "Don't tug on superman's cape..." Challenge a Bronco and you're apt to get run over.

Just look around and you see incredible evidence of what a difference a year makes. If you drove into campus along Stadium Drive between Howard and Oliver streets, you may have had the vague sense that something was missing. You are seeing green grass for the first time where that Soviet-style chic Elmwood Apartments used to be. Those 70-year-old "temporary" residences which represented our own Berlin wall were gone.

This summer, specialized machinery and workers skilled for the task dramatically transformed the south campus neighborhood. While significant, it is just the first step in the process of reimagining and reshaping the face of our campus so it meets the needs of our students and makes this University a place where they want to come explore and choose to learn at.

In 2019, we will begin construction on new student residences with the goal of having them open in fall 2020. Shortly after that, in 2021, we will open a new state-of-the-art student center to replace this venerated building. The design of this new center is the result of extensive conversations with students, staff and faculty from across the campus. It will have built into its design space specifically constructed to promote diversity and inclusion. But even that won't be the end of the South Neighborhood redevelopment project, as, again, working groups made up of individuals from around the campus are busy reimagining and developing a new master plan for the whole area.

But make no mistake, the strides we have taken this year to make WMU the school of choice are more than just skin deep, more than just cosmetic. They touch nearly every aspect of this University, from our curriculum and the start of new programs, to student development and well-being, to our research enterprise, our budget model, universitywide marketing, financial aid, fundraising, partnerships, and many other areas.

Taken together, they offer irrefutable evidence that our University is undergoing dramatic, dynamic change. These changes are made possible by faculty and staff working in every corner of this University. Together—in ways big and small—we have begun the process of changing our reality and our destiny. We are on the move. Together, we have begun to write the next chapter in Western State Normal School's storied history.

Last fall, more than 60 proposals were received from around the campus with ideas of how we might kick start this change process. Transformational ideas came from faculty and staff in Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Facilities Management,

Auxiliary Enterprises, and Athletics. New collaborations were formed and new investments were made from both central and unit resources.

One of our major efforts from this process was launched two weeks ago when more than 4,000 incoming students were the first to encounter the benefits of the Success at WMU program. Success at WMU builds on the foundation of our past successes with peer mentoring, but we have taken it to scale so that all incoming freshmen and transfer students can reap its benefits. We have added some 200 peer mentors to make this possible. When we started this process in January and February, some said scaling it up would take years. But we were able to make sure that every first-year student and transfer student was able to participate in this program starting this August. This was an incredible effort by a dedicated team from across the campus. Should we be surprised? No. When the motivation is helping students succeed, this community has demonstrated, again and again, they can move mountains. Let me express my appreciation for everyone involved in launching and guiding this key initiative.

From day one, each Success at WMU participant has been ensconced in a peer group of no more than 25 students; each group operates as a small circle of supporters for incoming undergraduates.

Over the coming weeks, groups will meet regularly to discuss strategies for making a smooth transition into college life. Peer mentors will encourage students to: identify specific skills for development, such as how to balance their academic and co-curricular responsibilities, develop relationships, identify useful campus resources, engage in self-care, and manage intercultural dynamics. Peer mentors will also plan co-curricular activities that will promote personal and academic growth.

This peer support network represents a ready-made family or community support system for our incoming undergraduates. Research has shown that students who are actively engaged in a community-experience model are much more likely to graduate. It will also help them to endure the inevitable difficult periods that we all confront. Getting over those roadblocks often seems quite daunting and can tax any one of us. Consequently, an integral part of Success at WMU efforts is an initiative to become a JED campus, with increased focus and programs to promote student mental health and grit. We know that ability is not enough to guarantee success. Even the smartest—or those with the most initial advantages— don't always prevail. Indeed, there is substantial research evidence that supports what we know intuitively from our own classrooms and activities, that success is driven more by your grit than your native ability. That proverbial hare had a lot of potential, but we know who won the race. He didn't have persistence. The good news is that JED efforts can teach and promote grit and thereby help all of our students realize their dreams.

Through the Success at WMU initiative, we are committing to a new and comprehensive partnership, a partnership with our students. While it is the responsibility of our students to hit that ultimate target, to master their disciplines and become degree completers, we accept that we have a part to play as well: to do more than simply admit them, but to work with them in building an infrastructure and community that maximizes their chances of success.

There are an estimated 1.2 billion gamers out there in the world and 192 million live right next to you in North America. Millennials represent the majority of them, and they are increasingly coming together to watch and participate in esports. Competitive esports teams are strung up in over 300 campuses across the country and professional leagues have given rise to a billion-dollar industry. The second of our transformational initiatives seeks to tap into that enthusiasm among millennials, not amongst us gray hairs, but amongst millennials through a state-of-the-art esports facility where students from around the campus and in the community, high schools, can engage with each other. By creating something that is comparable to a club sport with its own arena on campus, we hope to bring students out of their residence hall to connect with each other as gamers. If you were here earlier this week in this ballroom in the Bernhard Center, you would have seen it was packed with what looked like 300 different students coming here for the initial informational session. Again, we are creating community.

The transformational initiative process spurred dozens of other great ideas, including the development of enhanced virtual reality capabilities, which are being used by aviation and the College of Education and Human Development. We've also had the acquisition of teaching glass to enhance distance learning that faculty members are putting into place. But the transformational ideas and transformational actions taken this year were not confined to that process. Indeed, one of our most profound accomplishments was 30 years in the making. We have fundamentally rethought and redesigned the core of our educational experience. Under the leadership of the Faculty Senate, we have been putting in place a 21st century core curriculum called WMU Essential Studies, or WES. This is a massive undertaking that provides the opportunity to re-examine our curriculum and ensure its relevance to our students' success while upholding the core spirit and tenets of a liberal arts education.

WMU Essential Studies represents a chance to adapt our existing pedagogy in a way that best imparts the skills and competencies that we think are critical for tomorrow and that matches with our students' learning styles. The program is designed to equip and empower our students with the intellectual skills necessary to succeed in their majors, minors, graduate studies, future careers and life by emphasizing skills that our faculty have identified as essential. When fully implemented over the next two years, it will be transformational.

But we are not stopping there. As another way to help students start and stay on a successful trajectory toward degree completion, many of you know that we have made changes to our gateway classes. Gateway courses are often foundational to our major subject areas. They have high enrollments and, all too often, high failure rates, some as high as 50 and 60 percent. That serves the purpose not of opening the doors to learning but shutting them, closing off that pathway to completion. So, our faculty and departments have come together to address these problems. Be mindful that we have not changed what a student must master. We haven't watered down the curriculum. We haven't inflated grades, but we have made adjustments—supported by research—proven to make it more likely that students will succeed in their studies. In many cases, we have seen in just one year failure rates being cut in half. Our capable students are doing the work as we partner to teach, guide and assist. The result is real progress. Phenomenal progress.

We have also recognized that far too often even talented and persistent students on our campus run into financial roadblocks. We are a campus that prides itself on offering access to nationally renowned faculty and programs to students from across the economic spectrum, many of whom are first-generation college students. As we have looked at the data on why students fail to graduate, we have found that all too often there are upper-level students in their final year, in good standing who can't get over the final hurdle and end up dropping out. As a result, we ran an experiment, which is what we do as academics, run an experiment. We wanted to see what would be the impact of offering completion grant funding to students who have maxed out their other funding sources.

The grants were designed to assist students who are very close to graduation but who were at very significant risk to leave. Combining the efforts of our colleges, the president's, the provost's office, we identified about 210 students who might be candidates to drop and for whom extra resources might make the difference. But we combined those extra resources, in many cases, with financial literacy counseling, as well, to make sure they were able to take the next steps themselves. Of that 210 students, 200 have either graduated or are still in school. We can, we are, making a difference.

These measures—Success at WMU, Gateways to Completion, WMU Essential Studies and others—are predicated on the idea of partnering with every student we admit to assure them of a viable path to success. In so doing, we are changing the lives of our students, their families and their future children. We will still expect our students to put forward college-level effort and to take advantage of the many resources that exist to help them achieve. We have committed to work with them—not for them—to ensure that they leave here as graduates. WMU offers the promise of an education that has the power to change lives. We've all seen it happen. But it won't change people's lives if they don't graduate. This is where the promise of Western Michigan University and the reality of Western Michigan University must be aligned.

I'm so proud of the fact all these efforts are starting to pay off already, and we've seen improvements in our retention rates. Retention rates for first-year-in-any college students are up almost two percentage points to the highest level in five years. Indeed, every class—sophomores, juniors, seniors, and we have hit a five-year high in terms of our retention rates. But we are not stopping there. This year, advisors from across the campus are making a concerted effort to encourage students to enroll for 15 credit hours rather than 12. Research supports that this strategy will increase retention, shorten their time-to-degree and reduce their debt burden. This initiative is taking hold, and we're already seeing increases in the average number of credit hours enrolled, even though we've only been doing it for a semester. We can, we are, making a difference.

## MATCHING MONEY TO PRIORITIES

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As I met with groups around the campus—from deans and department chairs to faculty, staff, and even alumni over the past year—it became clear that if we wanted to succeed in a changing our environment, we needed to have the ability to make targeted investments and shift existing resources to priority areas. Our historical resource process or budget model was shrouded in mystery and driven by history. I know President Waldo was a brilliant man, but tying our

budgeting in 2018 to our 1903 structure didn't seem to be the right thing to do and maybe was taking that old "Western Way" a little bit strong. So, in addition to our transformational initiative process, we took another step by inviting each of the vice presidential areas to identify the priority areas for new investments.

Now, our leadership, when you invite them to spend money, they are not shy. They came up with about \$50 million worth of new ideas. And that was just scratching the surface and with a two-week deadline. But for the first time in recent memory, the cabinet actually had to talk about those priorities together. They had to debate those priorities together. And sometimes, believe it or not, even argued, thinking about the relative merits, not just for their units, but for the campus as a whole. They saw what was available and came together to make some really tough choices over what to do now and how much to invest our limited campus resources to meet our myriad needs. By working across our institutional silos, the end result was that we have made some key investments toward our Three R's:

### **Under retention**

- Over \$3.9 Million towards Student Financial Aid and help-desk support;
- We put another \$250,000 toward improved accommodations for students with visual or hearing impairments.

### **Under revenue**

- To enhance our future revenues, we invested \$1 million to enhance our capacity for development and alumni relations to connect with alumni and friends with the goal of increased gifts and donations. We also invested enhancing capacity of the office of research support faculty efforts to get grants and contracts.

### **In the area of reputation or school of choice**

- We invested \$1.7 Million towards new academic programs in physical therapy and product design;
- Another \$1.5 Million went in support of marketing and strategic communications to tell our story;

In addition, we heard the results of the staff polls done by PSSO and APA and committed \$50,000 toward staff professional development and training initiatives.

In total, over \$8 million in funding were allocated based on the ideas and thoughts provided through your departments, units, divisions, and vice presidents through the collaborative budget protocol process. We are making a difference.

The next step in this process of aligning resources with our priorities kicked off just last week with the launch of our Strategic Resource Management teams. This is an effort to explore how the University's budgeting model could evolve to help us more effectively align with our environment in ways that support our strategic priorities. We are looking to identify better ways

to preserve and advance our values with the resources entrusted to us by families, taxpayers, students, donors, and funding agencies. We need a model that provides budgetary incentives to control costs or enhance revenues while being consistent with our core values.

I'd like to thank all of you for working together to focus on the various phases of our strategic budgeting process. As evidenced by the Transformational Initiative process, which we embarked upon last fall, many of our best ideas bubble up from those working on the front lines. This is a demonstration of the fact that to advance our University, to reach our institutional goals requires an all-hands, all-minds kind of engagement. We're stronger when we work together, and we become a better model at the end of it.

But let me caution everyone that the development of a new budget model won't be the end. The implementation of WES, Success at WMU, or even the south campus neighborhood master plan won't be the end. Even when we are at the top of our game, we must change our game. It's not because our previous strategies were wrong or bad, but because the context in which they were selected and put in place has changed. Change is inevitable and the environment we operate in is always shifting, whether it's because the needs and interests of students change, the legislative or economic climate changes, or the faculty and staff who make up our community are different or simply at different parts of their lifecycles. As Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change."

At the senior leadership level, these changes will lead to five new vice presidents coming on board just this year. Dr. Terri Goss Kinzy is our new vice president for research, Tony Proudfoot is our new vice president for marketing and strategic communications, Dr. Jennifer Bott is our new provost, Renee Pearl is our new interim vice president for development and alumni relations and Dr. Candy McCorkle our new vice president for diversity and inclusion. Having come in January, Dr. Kinzy is now a grizzled veteran. But, you know, I was just at the student affairs all-staff welcome the other day. They had the staff stand up and introduce themselves, both the new and the old. What you saw there was they, too, had a large number of veteran staff. But they also had a large number of new team members. So, this transition that we're going through at the senior leadership is going on in other parts of the campus.

Change and transitions are inevitable. It is key for us as an organization to realize that even when things are going well, or our current initiatives have been fully implemented and we feel good, we are at the pinnacle, that we resist the temptation to rest on our laurels. Continuous improvement, continuous questioning of what, how and why we operate is vital to our success. It shouldn't be unusual for a university, as scholars and creators, we're always looking for new ideas, new ways to do things, pushing the boundaries of our disciplines. As teachers, we're always looking at how to convey the material in a way that helps students in a different way. Change is part of who we are. Exploring boundaries is part of who we are. We just need to make sure with our institution, because in the words of hockey great Wayne Gretsky, "A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be." We must empower our greatest asset—our faculty and staff—to look over the horizon, to respond to change, to aim for the sky.



## ADVANCING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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For me, this year has been a whirlwind, and I know that we all get so busy sometimes it seems like all we do is put out one fire after another. It's easy to lose track of why we do this and just what makes this such a special place to work. A vivid reminder of our collective purpose happened to me in early August at the national Phi Kappa Phi awards ceremony in Minneapolis. The honor society was presenting WMU with its Excellence in Innovation Award for our Seita Scholars program. This \$100,000 award recognized the University for achievement in finding a potent solution to expanding higher education opportunities for foster youth. I want to thank Ronicka Hamilton, director of the program, and Dr. Yvonne Unrau, director of our Center for Fostering Success and a professor of social work, for their dedication to improving outcomes for former foster youth, and to advancing research focused on how higher education, in general, can most effectively serve this population of students.

Awards are nice, but the best part of the ceremony was hearing from J. Gabriel Ware. J. Gabriel Ware is one of our Seita Scholars, and he's also just been inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi honor society. He shared his life story. He just got into a national honor society, and he talked about how when he was in high school, he barely had a C average. His grades were so poor, he knew he had no future in going to college. And, so, he started working jobs. He's a hard-working man. He worked three different jobs, but they all were minimum wage jobs, and he wasn't going anywhere. But his girlfriend had gone somewhere; she is a Bronco. And J said, "I want to be where she is, not where I am." And he thought about how to get there. He saved and saved his money. But, he thought, I can't just go to Western because my grades are so bad, I'm not getting in. He worked multiple jobs, and he went to community college. He worked multiple jobs, and he got out of community college. And he wanted to make sure he could come to Western, he could experience things and not go into debt. So, he continued to work multiple jobs, and somebody told him about the Seita Scholars program. He said it was like changing his life. He was able to go to school and not incur any more debt. In fact, not only did he get a BA, he got an MA, as well, as part of the Seita Scholars program. Not only did he take advantage of the academics, he took advantage of the internships. He took an unpaid internship, which he was able to do because of the Seita Scholars program. And he went off to Seattle to work at a newspaper. He left us that day in Minneapolis to work at the New York Times. That's what we do.

That's a story of the power of that program, making a difference. It's a story of the power of education, the power of the people at WMU, and the importance of the programs we operate. More than half of the state's foster youth in higher education are pursuing their degrees right here in our program at WMU. The Seita program meets a vital need in our state by helping to carve a brighter future for some of our most vulnerable students. I want to thank Rep. Brandt Iden, who helped us secure this year an additional \$500,000 for the Seita Scholars Program from the state legislature.

## ADVANCING WMU

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We are making a difference not just for our Seita Scholars. Attend graduation ceremony and you will see and feel so clearly that we can, we are making a difference—not just for our students, but for their families and their communities. That's why we teach, discover and engage—to change lives. As thousands of our alumni in our worldwide network can attest, those who invest in a WMU education come out on the other side career-ready and well-prepared for that next stage of life; better than 90 percent of them are able to find jobs in just three months. That's a phenomenal statistic, and it's important that we do all we can to attract students to this high-quality educational institution and graduate them so that they can enjoy that fantastic return.

While our teaching is central to who we are and what we do, it is not all we do. We are a research university that believes in, and is deeply committed to the discovery process and the search for new answers, new interpretations, and new creativity. We believe that both activities are vital; teaching and research, they are no substitutes. They complement and inform each other. Just as we seek to strengthen our pedagogy, we must also continually look for ways to increase our capacity to do research and discovery. You may have heard me talking about increasing our research funding to \$50 million. Let's be clear; dollars are not the ultimate measure. Innovation, creativity, discovery and knowledge are the ends. Sharing knowledge with the wider world is our mission. Research dollars are just a means to better facilitate making that happen.

Over the past year, you may have noticed some significant changes in the Office of the Vice President for Research. In our research office, we put together a strong, results-oriented team in place. They are busy improving how the office operates to identify and disseminate research funding opportunities, and provide assistance to help faculty members apply for, receive and manage external funding.

We have already seen significant new research awards, especially from the National Science Foundation. These awards include a major research instrumentation grant supporting physics and engineering work in materials science headed by Professor Clem Burns. In our Evaluation Center, Dr. Lori Wingate and her team garnered a \$5 million award to lead a national EvaluATE support center for the National Science Foundation's Advanced Technological Education Program.

Our commitment to promoting research is additionally exemplified by our recent Innovation Network on Opioids, which brought together faculty and staff from a broad range of disciplines and units to develop new partnerships and collaborations to address this national crisis.

And research is, of course, not a just a faculty enterprise. The creation of new knowledge offers important, hands-on learning experiences for our students. OVPR has thus launched the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship, as well as a campaign to revitalize internal research awards to reach more students in every discipline.

As noted earlier, this year we've been investing in bringing in a new professional in OVPR dedicated to assisting in growing our research mission. This is just one of the ways we are increasing our focus on research development. The office has also been partnering more with the

Office of Government Affairs to continue to identify new funding opportunities at the local, state and national levels. That collaboration has already paid off under the direction of Greg Rosine and his team, with an additional \$1.5 million secured with the help of our local delegation, led Rep. Jon Hoadley and Sen. Margaret O'Brien, to bring that money to this campus to support the Michigan Geological Survey, a survey that just happened to find the biggest deposit of potash North America; as well as our Unified Clinics, an enterprise that serves 80,000 patient appointments each year. We can, we are, making a difference.

## IMPACT

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If you attended the Board of Trustees on Wednesday, you heard mention of our regional economic-impact report and learned about the incredible value this University returns, even for those who never step foot on our campus. This new study revealed that the University's local economic impact is worth \$1.6 billion. To put that into perspective, that's about 15 times more than the state gives us in terms of its appropriation. In fact, it's more than the state gives to the 15 universities combined in appropriations. That study showed that not only do we support economic activity, we also support jobs, nearly 17,000 of them, direct or indirect.

### **Talk about making a difference.**

One of our challenges is to get the public to better recognize what WMU has to offer and herald those benefits. We want to become—and should be—the school of choice for students seeking a high-quality university that is learner centered whether they are from Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Detroit, Chicago or Saudi Arabia. We should be the school of choice for businesses looking for talent or new products, for nonprofits looking for assistance, for the public seeking culture or entertainment, and for government agencies looking for solutions. We have the substance. We have the expertise to serve all those needs, but it does no good if no one knows about us. A hidden gem is just that, hidden.

So, we're putting in the groundwork to advance the sophistication and reach of our universitywide marketing. You'll hear more about this in coming months, but expect to be engaged in workshops and discovery sessions related to marketing and branding. Just like every other initiative that meaningfully moves this institution forward, we will need your great minds, your great ideas and your help with this endeavor, as well.

Last month, we also started the search for a permanent vice president for development and alumni relations, who we hope to have in place by the end of the year. That individual will be charged with leading a capital campaign in the years to come and better engaging our 250,000 global alumni. We have strong champions out there who believe in this University; they know its value and want to help us advance our mission. But when only 4 percent of them give on an annual basis, we know we have a problem. We need to better engage or re-engage them, as well the community friends who support both what we do and what we add to this region.

## CLOSING

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I hope you will agree that we're off to a good start. We have made impressive progress on a number of fronts. It's clear that Western Michigan University is strong, and it's getting stronger.

To be sure, achieving our ambitious goals will require yearslong efforts and strategic initiatives. But we've set the foundation and, together, we're building. We haven't made it to the mountain top. But there has been progress, and we are gaining momentum, thanks to the individual and collective efforts of our people, our units, our departments, and colleges. Brick by brick, we are building a stronger foundation. Some of these building blocks are large and some are small, but they are all crucial to the structural integrity of what we're creating—the school of choice and a campus community that is focused on all aspects of student success.

There is still much to be done as we have not "built" it yet. Indeed, since we strive for excellence, we will probably never be done finding ways to be better, stronger, more impactful. But, collectively, we can make a difference; collectively, we are making a difference. It is an honor to be your president. It is a privilege to be a fellow Bronco. Thank you for your contributions. Let's keep changing lives.