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## 2019 State of the University Address

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*Western Michigan University*

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# 2019 State of the University address

**President Montgomery** delivered his third State of the University address during WMU's 2019 Fall Convocation, which included an awards ceremony honoring faculty and staff excellence.



President Edward Montgomery delivers his third State of the University address Friday, Sept. 20.

## INTRODUCTION

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Good morning. I want to take a moment to again thank our [11 incredible award winners](#). Their dedication to improving and strengthening our campus and serving our community is truly awe inspiring. While these individuals stand out for their accomplishments, I have often said that it's the people here at WMU who are our special sauce.

Their commitment makes a difference in the lives of our students, in the community where we reside and in the broader world is really remarkable. I'd like to share the story that some of you might have heard at last spring's Board of Trustees meeting, but that I find particularly poignant as a reminder of why and what we do here at WMU matters.

**Eddie Warr** was born into a home fraught with difficulties no child should have to endure—substance abuse, domestic violence, instability and hunger. He and his sister became bound together in their mutual battle to survive and grow up.

Determined to stay together, they struggled through multiple placements in the foster care system, where some of their placements seemed uninterested in having him around and others seemed only interested in the money. Finally, they got lucky and they were adopted into a stable home that wanted them both.

But Eddie was 16, and his years of being part of the system had left him hardened, distrustful and rebellious. He acted out and in his own words, “made mistakes, as we all do throughout our lives.” And he thought that he'd never have a chance for a better life, for a future.

Then Eddie became a young father—he had his outlook changed. When he had his daughter, he said that his outlook changed. He wanted to create a good life for himself and for her. Eddie would eventually come to Western Michigan University because he was looking for an opportunity. “All I want is a chance,” he said. And we gave it to him.

Eddie buckled down and he worked hard, but he still thought his opportunities would be limited by his past. But he met Bob Stewart, his advisor at the Zhang Career Development Center, who saw something in Eddie and encouraged him to apply to be a Greenleaf Scholar. This program was created by another Bronco alum and Trustee Bill Johnston, specifically to open the world of finance to members of underrepresented groups. With the help and support of his mentor and many others, Eddie was awarded a slot in the Greenleaf Trust internship program, which provides him with not only resources, but access to the world of finance and a whole new career path that he never imagined.

He told us he feels empowered to finally envision a bright future for himself and his daughter. Now Eddie’s going to graduate next fall with his bachelor’s degree and is on course for a successful finance career. Eddie has joined us today and I’d like to ask him to stand and be recognized.



WMU student Eddie Warr

When Eddie told his story in front of the **Board of Trustees**, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. Everyone was incredibly proud of him AND of those members of our community and alumni who believe in second chances and who actively work to create those opportunities. That’s what they did—they extended a hand and gave Eddie a second chance. Now it’s important to note that his success didn’t come about because anyone lowered the bar for him. No, they kept it high and helped him elevate to it. That’s what we do at WMU.

We continue to work with, not for our students, but work with them so that they can succeed. Eddie’s story tells us our efforts are working and that we can and are making a difference. Eddie and students like him give us a reason to jump out of bed and come to work every day.

At WMU, we meet students where they are, regardless of their circumstances, and add

value to their lives. From our Medallion scholars, to those with more humble high school records, we make an impact. And you know what? You are really good at it. Yes you are! That was recently validated by both **Washington Monthly** and **U.S. News and World Report**. Both publications measure how much colleges and universities affect social mobility and what they contribute to students' likelihood of success. Washington Monthly ranked us first in the state of Michigan for our impact on alumni earnings ten years after graduation and second in Michigan for our impact on graduation rates.

U.S. News placed us at the top of Michigan institutions as well in their social mobility rankings, which look at success rates for low-income students. Not only are we number one in the state, we're in the top 100 of both private and public universities in the country and in the top 50 of all public universities in this nation. We may not have the endowments of some of those guys or the giant football stadiums of others, or national luster of some of our sister universities, but when it comes to adding value, for getting students where they want to go, that old Western State Normal School motto still rings true: "**So That All May Learn.**"

That's what everyone in this room does every day. Our colleagues who we recognized today are exemplars of the outstanding qualities that we bring to our work. Simply put, their excellence should inspire us to even greater heights.

**Artistotle** said, "Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives—choice not chance, determines your destiny." The pursuit of excellence, whether as an individual or for an organization, starts with high intentions and a big dream, but it also requires persistence, hard work and purposeful actions.

We're celebrating the results of one such audacious dream just this year—the **50th anniversary of the Apollo 11** moon landing. Many of us who are baby boomers remember where we were when **Neil Armstrong** first took that "giant step for mankind." That voyage and landing, however, did not occur by accident, it was the result of a dream, yes, but also persistence and purposeful strategy by hundreds of not just astronauts and scientists, but programmers, technicians, machinists, part makers and countless others.

The collective effort was only as good as the weakest link, for failure at any step or by even the smallest margin could have meant disaster. A coordinated, focused team effort is what made it possible. While we saw the astronauts on TV, it was the countless others, most of whom we will never know about, played vital roles. And so it is with the attainment of most big dreams.

**President Kennedy** set our nation on a course for the moon earlier in that decade. He could have aimed at a lower goal—one that most certainly could have been successful. But instead he said, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard." then he added little lesser-known quote, "...because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills."

Think about it for a second. JFK set a lofty goal that some considered was unobtainable, but it would allow our nation to demonstrate what we were capable of accomplishing if we could marshal the best of our energies and skills. That “marshaling the best of our energies and skills,” that’s just not about going to the moon. It is about who we are. or even more, who we want to be right here at Western Michigan University.

## OUR CHALLENGES

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Higher education in Michigan, and at our University, is facing upheaval in at least three very significant areas: state demographics, the changing nature of work and the costs of higher education.

By the year 2030, the pool of Michigan high school graduates will be 14% smaller than it is today. As a University that currently draws 79% of its enrollment in a state that’s home to 14 other public universities, the result is that we are facing unprecedented competition for a shrinking pool of increasingly skeptical students. To get them enrolled it is not sufficient to say we are open for business, as it might have been in the 1960s and 70s, or maybe even the 1990s, when many of us went to school. We must stand out and give them a reason why WMU should be their first-choice school.

While higher education has many individual and social benefits, one that stands foremost in the minds of many prospective students and their parents is its direct impact on their employability. But **Dell Technologies** estimates that 85% of the jobs that will be needed in 2030 don’t even exist yet. Just 10 years ago, people did not pursue jobs managing social media, they did not aspire to develop virtual reality tools or use 3D printing technology in the workplace or to operate drones for geological or environmental or even package delivery purposes. Today, these are careers that WMU students are successfully pursuing. We must continue preparing students for today, while also guiding them through their career paths into the future.

Finally, state governments are increasingly shifting the cost of public education from the taxpayer to the students and their families. Partially as a consequence of this, the cost of education has risen dramatically and nationwide student debt now tops \$1.5 trillion.

Where once our state funded as much of 75% of our general fund, that number has tumbled to closer to 25%, and there’s no sign of it rising anytime in the future. The state of **Michigan ranks 44th in funding for higher education**. As our legislature grapples with the 2020 state budget, what’s been proposed .5—one half of 1% increase in our general funds—that will not deaden this downward cycle. The consequence of this shift is that there no longer such a thing as permanent funding. Each year, indeed each semester, we must demonstrate unquestionable value, giving students a reason to enroll here, funders a reason to support our research and creative activities and alumni and supporters a reason to give.

So the challenge is real, its immediate and it is significant. To reach our goals, to fulfill our

dreams, I would argue that “organizing and measuring the best of our energies and skills” is not just an abstract noble aspiration, but is absolutely necessary for an institution that seeks to overcome its difficulties and ensure “that all may learn,” both now and in the years to come. But as philosopher **Will Durant** said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

## A DRUMBEAT OF SUCCESS

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In my first [State of the University address](#), I laid out a vision of three R’s that must be accomplished for us to reach our highest aspirations. We must enhance our reputation, we must diversity and increase our revenue, and we must improve student success or retention.



Faculty and staff listened as President Montgomery enumerated the University’s progress toward achieving key goals.

So, how are we doing? Collectively, we are making strides in each of these pursuits. But, as I said earlier, excellence is not a single act. It does not come with a switch that you can turn on and off. It comes from a relentless pursuit of a vision. Here are a few examples of our recent success.

Let’s start with retention. Last year we offered targeted completion grant funding to assist seniors who were close to graduation, and were at significant risk of dropping out. We have literally hundreds of students each year who are in good standing who are within one or two semesters of graduating and then stop. What we did was target money to get them back on track and help them graduate.

As a result of the investments that were made, more than 125 students who may have given up on their dreams of earning a degree are now graduates of this institution. This was a wonderful personal achievement for each of them—they put in the hard work to complete their studies—it also improved our six-year graduation rate by three whole percentage points. We need to scale this effort up and we are doing so this fall, and in the first few months alone we have already helped 29 different students return to campus for

their senior year. This effort requires the cooperation of multiple campus offices, but it can make a big difference for our students and for us as an institution.

We also launched a new, high-demand health program this summer—a **doctor of physical therapy**. Instead of simply setting up a standard curriculum and expecting students to enroll, the program’s planners sought the input from our prospective students on what would make the DPT degree more attractive. Those students asked for a concentrated timeline that would enable them to complete classroom and clinical learning in 30 months—a shorter time than similar programs around the country. This has the potential to lower their student debt load and allows them to graduate and head into the field months ahead of their counterparts in other programs.

We know that cost is not the only barrier for our students. As part of our **Success at WMU** efforts, we are broadening our mental health services. We are now a **JED campus**, one of only 200 institutions in the country and just 15 in Michigan that have earned this status. It has enabled us to build a campuswide team that will work to help students understand what is available to them. It will also allow us to connect students with additional online resources and develop a strategic plan for continued progress.

We know that building and maintaining an inclusive campus is also critically important. We must continue to embrace and celebrate our diversity and become a school of choice for those who didn’t know they had one. That’s why I am enormously proud of the fact that **Minority Access** listed us as one of the leading institutions in the country for increasing the enrollment of African Americans, and that we recently received a **Higher Education Excellence in Diversity award for the seventh year** in a row. I also have to take personal privilege and give a shout-out to my fellow economists right here at WMU, for they have continued in a partnership with Michigan State University to sponsor the **American Economic Association Summer Training Program**. This program is responsible for fully 20% of all economics doctorates awarded to underrepresented minorities.

Now we haven’t always gotten everything right the first time—we’re human after all—but all of you know that creativity and innovation takes a continual willingness to examine what is and isn’t working and to adapt to that information. Success at WMU is an example of such learning and iterative innovation. As one of our original transformational initiatives, we knew the power of mentorship and set a goal to provide every new student with a mentor. This made sense—research has shown mentoring first-generation college students is a key determinant of their success and that the benefits last through their lifetime.

**Gallup research** has found that students who have a mentor in college are twice as likely to be engaged at work once they graduate. So we envisioned a campus where all of our mentors and mentees would be sitting around in rap sessions like they used to do back in the 70s when I was a college student.

What we learned is that college students are vastly different today than they were 20, 30 or

40 years ago. Not all students always need or want to get together in person to get advice and information. They want to meet their mentors where they are—and for many of them that’s on their devices. So we’ve revamped the idea. All students still get a mentor. But now, the mentor meets them where they are. This new program, this **newly named peer2peer mentoring experience**, is much more digital. New students connect with trained and caring peers through a combination of digital and in-person experiences. They interact in ways that are comfortable, familiar and convenient for them. It’s an excellent example of again, how we take action, learn and adapt as an organization.

Our progress is also reflected in changes we have made in our physical space, or as **Western Student Association President Lauren Smith** says, “Lackin’ McCracken.” The new **Student Center and Dining Facility in Hilltop Village** that is being built on that old building’s site will be a space where students can gather, collaborate on common interests and develop community. It will house myriad student services on three stories designed to be welcoming, inclusive and interactive. The first two stories will begin serving students two years from now in the fall of 2021, and we’ll celebrate the second phase, a large third-floor dining space a year later in 2022.

We also recently celebrated setting the final beam atop the **Arcadia Flats residential facility**. This six-story, 197-unit structure will welcome more than 340 students when it opens next fall. It’s been consciously designed to meet the needs of our upper-level and graduate students in an environment that’s attractive and a **LEED-certified building**.

Our already nationally recognized **College of Aviation** is going to be flying even higher, thanks to a partnership with the community of **Battle Creek** and the **state of Michigan** to build a new, state-of-the-art education center at the W.K. Kellogg Airport. This \$20 million project—which includes a \$15 million grant from the state—will be open to our students next fall.

Now some may ask why we are investing in new buildings? Can’t we just make do with the ones we have? Those temporary Elmwood apartments were good enough for students in the 1940s. Why not today?

Through many lean years Western has done an great job of taking care of its buildings and extending their useful life. In fact, the building that you are in right now, originally designed as a conference center and then retrofitted to become a student center, has long outlived even the most liberal interpretation of a useful lifetime.

But what goes unseen every day in these buildings—indeed they are some of our oldest structures—is we don’t actually save money by continually keeping them afloat. We spend too much on these buildings in heating and cooling—when the heating and cooling works—and we spend a lot of money on servicing them, and they are energy-intensive, and some of the biggest producers of carbon on this campus. That’s bad for the environment and it’s also bad for our budget. What’s most important, though, is that they do not meet today’s students’ needs.

Did you know that the number one reason our admitted students choose another university over WMU is because of Western's campus environment? Students tell us explicitly and also through their college choices that we need to make these improvements. Some might say these are vanity projects that have no connection to what really matters—student success. But here's what we know, and we know unequivocally from a mountain of studies over decades: students who live on campus do better; they have better grades; they persist and they graduate at higher rates.

Students who are engaged in activities like those that will be housed in our new student center—things like RSOs and student government, along with other activities—those students do better. These improvements are not just about catering to students—they are also in service of our priority to make sure that they learn and that they grow and that they are successful. While we're on the topic of student success, you might be interested in knowing that we have found that those who participating at our E-sports facility have a higher retention rate than the average student. They may be playing games, but it is having an educational impact.

Our progress on our campus is also showing up in our research and creative activity. We are a veritable research idea machine—literally. When the **National Science Foundation** put out a call across academia for “The Next Big Idea” to shape the future of STEM research, more than 800 entries poured in from universities and think tanks across the country. Only one Michigan institution was included among the 33 finalists and only one institution in the whole country had three finalists amongst the group awaiting the results—it's us!

On top of this, a WMU research team has started working with peers at **Iowa State, Michigan Tech and North Dakota State University** on a nearly **\$1 million National Science Foundation grant** to develop strategies to increase the number of female faculty members in STEM disciplines.

We recently celebrated the **\$1.4 million grant** from the **Health Resources and Services Administration** that will support a program to address Michigan's devastating opioid epidemic, and will do this by partnering with communities to prevent, treat and support opioid recovery efforts.

The **Monroe-Brown Foundation Entrepreneurship Fund** provided a **\$140,000 grant** to WMU recently to support efforts to develop entrepreneurs. This grant will be used by our Introduction to Customer Discovery program to support our **WMU Technology Development Fund** efforts and similar technology transfer activities.

I could go on....but we have limited time.

So whether we're talking about senior completion assistance or responsive academic programs or focusing on our students' mental health needs, promoting inclusion, building the campus that our students want and need or creating science's next big idea, the best of

our energies and skills are coming together for the greater good. We are making a difference.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNER

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We cannot rest on our laurels, no matter how lustrous or tempting that might be. As the father of **Western State Normal School**, **Senator Vandercook** said, “But glory for the past is not sufficient.<sup>6</sup> It is the present and future that we must cope with to make for the betterment of conditions.” So we are also focused on laying the groundwork for the future. Let me point to some examples of our building the habit of excellence with an eye toward the longer term.

Our students tell us that they need more flexibility in their educational journey without compromising them getting their degree. They also need a more seamless educational experience. Our response is something we are calling **One WMU**, an initiative to create a new university college that will functionally centralize academic advising and some academic support services. It will also create an academic home with necessary supports for new students, exploring students and those who are transitioning between majors. This is an exciting cross-campus collaboration involving multiple colleges, academic affairs, student affairs, diversity and inclusion, and many others. We are not in that old, siloed world anymore—we are coming together.

One WMU will allow us to prepare students for the future while offering them the flexibility they need to explore their interests, their passions and broaden their horizons. In a world where as many as half of all incoming college students enter without a stated major, and again, another half of our own Broncos change their major at some point during their college career, we need to find a way to help them begin those transitions, begin their studies and career explorations in a manner that allows them the freedom to explore and to adapt while supporting their academic progress.

Students and their families also tell us that the reason they pick a college is to help them prepare for jobs and careers. I know, and you know, and indeed they know that they get much more out of college than a job, just a career—they get much more. But the promise of career opportunity is front and center in their minds when choosing where to go, and so we need to be responsive if we want to improve our retention. The good news about this focus is that if we improve there, not only do our students benefit, but it increases revenue and also increases our reputation.

So we’re also taking a great stride forward in **WMU Essential Studies**, an integrated general education undergraduate curriculum that will be launching next fall thanks to great efforts by the faculty and the Faculty Senate. They are developing a three-part program which invites critical thinking and builds those skills that will be needed by tomorrow’s leaders. The faculty-led innovations in our core curriculum will not only build a better future for our students, they will build on our reputation of quality.

Another long-term focus for the campus is on our people, those in this room and around the campus. It is our people who make WMU what it is today. You are what make Eddie's story possible. So how are we placing you front and center?

Earlier this year we launched an initiative to understand and to strengthen our culture. Step one, we asked. We began with an employee engagement survey and 50% of you responded—that's an incredible response rate. Thank you!

There were positive results, to be sure, but I want to be unmistakably clear. You were candid. We heard you and we appreciate it. Your message: We have work to do. We heard you when you said you don't feel like we are always on the same page, on the same team; we heard skepticism borne from strained relationships, the impact of limited resources, siloed behavior, a lack of accountability and the need for more and better communication.

So what's our next step? In just a few short weeks we'll gather once again. The cabinet will present the results and start a conversation with you. We'll be forthright in sharing the results and ask you to work with us to build a culture that attracts and retains the best and brightest minds, who are committed to our students and to advancing knowledge. We in leadership are all committed to demonstrating an open and more transparent communication and engagement across the institution. The next step will not be something done to you, it will be done with you. Please join us.

We recognize that we can't get to where we want to be as a campus without additional resources, whether that be for meeting the needs of our students or for those of our faculty or our staff. Unfortunately, we are in trying times. Our fall enrollment report was disappointing—a 5% decrease. This is greater than we have experienced in recent years and will adversely affect all of our units' budgets. Compounding that is, unfortunately, we are still awaiting for the state of Michigan to adopt a budget for the year 2020. This is generating unprecedented uncertainty in what our resources are, even though we are already a quarter of the way into our fiscal year.

Regardless, of where we end up this year, it's clear that we must use those resources that we have wisely and in service to our priorities. To further that, we began **Strategic Resource Management**, a new Universitywide budget model in April 2018. SRM has the goal of putting new transparency and clarity into our budgeting processes while providing incentives to best serve our students through decentralized decision-making.

The committees that are part of this effort have been hard at work designing systems that meet those goals and adjusting them based on feedback from the steering committee comprised of the cabinet, including myself. The steering committee is set to meet next week to review and approve the final recommendations and we are still on target for meeting our implementation goals.

So the **Hilltop Village**, One WMU, Strategic Resource Management are all interwoven, major moves designed to achieve our goals of enhanced retention, reputation and revenue. Each day they become more intertwined and more resonant. And the thing that will pull

them all together is the outcome of **Think Big effort**.

In 1986, a task force was formed here to examine “The Nature of the University.” Here’s what they found in 1986: Western Michigan University should publicly pick a direction or directions upon which to focus its efforts, rather than trying to do everything. WMU must become a major institution in southwestern Michigan or surrender leadership to ... one of our neighbors to the north. That’s 1986.

It’s time to be clear about who we are and what we stand for. What is the special thing that we offer the world? We come to work every day to transform lives and make new discoveries and to create. That’s not just Western, however, it’s most research universities.

Think Big is about focusing that WHAT we do into a special WHY we do it.

The community has responded enthusiastically to the effort. More than **1,100 Broncos** and friends participated in the first three phases. Then we surveyed another **4,200 people**. That’s nearly **5,500 people engaged** in this disciplined, rigorous and most importantly, inclusive process.

The preliminary results are in and the Think Big team is synthesizing it with the design work that’s happened over the summer. We’ll be ready to present our Big Idea on **Oct. 14**. And that **Big Idea** will be the strategy that pulls all of our initiatives together. It will be our moonshot.

## CONCLUSION

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**Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins** and **Buzz Aldrin** did an amazing job, but as I noted earlier, they didn’t accomplish the moon landing quickly or solely through their own efforts—far from it. The same is true for us today. We will achieve our moonshot if we all work together and continually seek excellence in our ever-evolving environment. Our success—our students’ success, our ability to advance new knowledge—depends on our willingness and openness to new thinking and to innovate. It lies in our resolve to build great programs and evaluate them in light of a new environment that’s in upheaval.

**Eddie Warr’s** story is our story. We are the home of the **Greenleaf Trust** internship program; we’re the home of the **Seita Scholars** program for our foster care youth; we’re the home of the Kalamazoo Promise Scholars program which supports KPS graduates, a district where 70% of students are on free or reduced-price lunch. We’re the home of the Foundation Scholars program, which serves our nation’s and our state’s most talented and most vulnerable students.

The most encouraging outcome from the employee engagement survey is the one that tells us that WMU’s future is bright. It gives us great hope and shows enormous potential for carrying us forward. There was resounding agreement across all employee groups that what we have is a shared belief in the power of higher education for transforming lives,

generating valuable new knowledge and improving society. I can't think of a stronger base than that from which to build the future, despite the external pressures; we want to remain the place where "All May Learn."

Our students and your commitment are what get me out of bed in the morning. They are MY why. This year we will identify our collective why; the unifying idea that will "organize and measure the best of our energies and skills." We will continue to make short-term strides and never blink or shrink from our mission.

Thank you for all that you do. The pursuit of our dream requires all of us to engage in persistent and purposeful action.

Thank you very much.