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10-25-2007

State of the University

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Dunn, John M., "State of the University" (2007). *WMU President John Dunn*. 370.

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State of the University
President John M. Dunn
Academic Convocation
Oct. 25, 2007

Good afternoon Trustees DeNooyer, Johnston and Miller; President Emeritus Haenicke; students, faculty and staff; families of honorees; and members of the community. Thank you for being here to take part in this celebration. We have just seen and heard a wonderful illustration of what makes this University the outstanding institution that it is. We have honored nine members of our faculty and staff. The story of each is reflective of who and what Western Michigan University is and continually aspires to be.

This afternoon, I plan to update you on some important news, share a little of my vision for WMU and announce some areas of focus for the coming months. I'll talk about some big issues, but as I do, I'm always mindful of the small details and the impact they can have.

When I was teaching at Oregon State University, the Department of Education would frequently ask me to go into a school to consult with a teacher. During one of those trips to Salem, Ore., I was greeted in front of the school by Mark, a young man with Down Syndrome, who was clearly a member of the class I was there to visit. He was bubbly and talkative, but it was clear to me he had a serious runny nose and needed a handkerchief. I offered one from my pocket. He took it, used it appropriately then carefully folded it and politely handed it back to me. I was impressed. I went inside, located the teacher I'd come to visit and began to introduce myself. She cut me off, "I know who you are," she said. "I've been watching you with Mark

from my classroom window, and I want you to know that I have been teaching for over 25 years, and what you did with Mark is the most help I've ever gotten from the Department of Education.”

So, let's keep our eye on the big picture, but let's always pay attention to the details that make that big picture happen.

The big picture, though, is what a State of the University address is about. There is a basic question at the heart of a speech like this, and I don't want to keep anyone in suspense. I will answer it first.

The state of Western Michigan University is strong and vibrant. It is known nationally and internationally, and it is the alma mater of 165,000 alumni who have gone on to have incredibly successful and rewarding lives.

We are very good at what we do. We can celebrate our success. But we can't stand still. We have to be even better, stronger and more responsive to a changing environment. We have more work to do.

When I came here--now more than 100 days ago--I found an institution that met and surpassed what I expected to find. I was impressed by what I knew of WMU as an outsider. Since I have had the privilege of becoming part of this University community, I've learned my impression of WMU was correct, but it was incomplete.

As we all know, this is a research university, one of fewer than 200 in the United States so designated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. It is one of only 97 public universities in the United States authorized to shelter a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. And it is home to a wealth of outstanding program offerings, many of which are among the nation's best in their disciplines. I knew much of that before I came, but everyday, I discover some new program or research initiative that simply leaves me in awe of the quality of the academic enterprise here.

Our people make the difference

One thing rarely well understood from the outside of an organization is the caliber of its people. I now know that this University's strength and vibrancy is the result of the people here who have committed themselves to excellence, to the success of our students and to the belief in the power of education to transform lives.

We've just heard brief profiles of nine of those people. Those profiles told us of people who reflect the very core of what a university should be. We heard about passion for their work, collegiality, commitment to students, fairness and a dedication to excellence.

- John Benson and Rob Pennock (PEN-nuk) were honored as Distinguished Service Award winners for going far above and beyond the basic responsibilities of their roles. Their students and colleagues are the richer for their contributions.

- Stephen Covell (COE-vell), Igor Fedotov (FED uh tof) and David Huffman were honored as Emerging Scholars. Though they are still early in their careers, we know they are destined to have an enormous impact in their disciplines.

- Arthur McGurn has been named a Distinguished Faculty Scholar for a lifetime of achievement and a body of work that has garnered international renown.

- And Richard Gershon (gur SHOHN), Trent Kynaston (kin us TON) and Jennifer Palth (PALL thay) were honored as winners of the Distinguished Teaching Award. They were lauded by their students and colleagues for bringing to their classrooms the richness of their scholarship and an incredible level of teaching skill.

Please join me in thanking them once more for their contributions with a round of applause. (PAUSE) Could we also ask their family and loved ones to stand and be acknowledged.

I have one more honor to announce. This is not a surprise to the person involved. As many of you know, there is a tradition at WMU of honoring selected faculty members by using funds from private donors to establish a series of named professors. I intend in the future to honor that tradition. This afternoon, though, I wish to announce one new named professor selected by Dr. Diether Haenicke in the final weeks of his interim presidency.

Dr. Stephen Covell, who we have just honored as an emerging scholar, was selected by President Haenicke, to be the Mary Meader Professor of Comparative Religion. Dr. Covell is already using that title to extend the reputation of the university in the international arena. Please join me in congratulating him.

We've honored several people here today, but there are several hundred more who play a critical role everyday in making this an environment that's easy for our students to navigate and conducive to learning. I get to know people like them constantly as I get to know this campus.

- There's Judy Northey, who runs the Parkview Cafe and literally exudes the kind of warmth and compassion that students who are far from home crave. One trip into that engineering campus eatery and you're a member of Judy's family--probably for life.

- There's our landscape services crew led by Tim Holysz (hall LITZ). They keep this campus sparkling and who never fails to respond to a request with a smile and immediate action. If you're talking about recruitment tools, let me tell you just how vital the role of Tim and Paul and their crew really is. Their work can make or break a family's college decision during the first five minutes of a campus visit.

- Tom Swartz of the engineering faculty, who just spent weeks running and working out to build up his stamina so he could run, as he has for several years, with a team of his students to compete in last weekend's Campus Classic 5K run.

And there are hundreds of others I could single out, from the cooks in our campus cafeterias to the professional staff members who welcome our international students to the clerical/technical staff members who keep our departments and critical business functions running smoothly. We have very good people here-people who set a high standard for all of us to emulate

I'd be remiss if I did not acknowledge one other person today. Professor Stuart Dybek, who has been a member of our university community for more than 33 years, recently was selected as the winner of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship--the genius award. Although he's still an adjunct faculty member and a member of our Prague Summer Program faculty, Professor Dybek has retired, now lives in Chicago and is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Northwestern University. When he learned of the fellowship and the impending announcement of the award, he immediately made calls back to this campus to ensure that we knew and could take full advantage of the publicity that goes with being the home institution of a MacArthur Fellow. He is one of us and retains an intense loyalty and love for this University. And we are enormously proud of him.

Our students continue to make us proud as well.

I've been especially proud of the accomplishments of our students in the months since I've been on campus. They are eager, bright, and they love their university.

- There's Chris Praedel, our student body president, who just weeks ago led a student rally in Lansing to ask our lawmakers to give WMU and all of higher education the support needed for Michigan's future.

- There's Rosana Alsaud, chair of the Graduate Student Advisory Committee, who has been active in raising the profile of our graduate programs around the state and nation.

- And there is our most recent round of student award winners:

- Our engineering team, which won the national Parker Hannifin Chainless Challenge, a hydraulic bicycle design competition held in Cleveland,

- political science doctoral student Fodei Batty (FOE day BAT tee) has been named a 2007-08 Jennings Randolph Peace Scholar by the U.S. Institute of Peace, one of only 10 scholars nationally to receive the prestigious \$20,000 award to support his field research and dissertation writing.

- the Sky Broncos, , who captured the National Intercollegiate Flying Association's Region III title this month--for the 16th time in 17 years--and will vie for the national championship next May.

My Vision

I've shared with you how impressed I am with our university and how our people make this the incredible University it is. I've been asked since I arrived on campus what my vision for WMU is, and I've resisted going down that road. As someone just learning about the campus, its people and culture, its history, and its strengths and challenges, I did not think it appropriate to share a vision without having the complete picture. It would have been disrespectful to this campus community.

But, while my vision may not yet be 20/20, I'm beginning to get a feel for all of those qualities so important to Western Michigan University's future. My vision for the University is evolving, and I refine it daily, but it revolves around our people and can be characterized in a single word— growth.

- Growth in the number of students we serve
- Growth in our commitment to speak with pride about our University
- Growth in our reputation as an institution that serves as a model of shared governance, civil discourse and inclusive behavior
- Growth in our output and support for research and scholarship
- And, most important, growth in our commitment to make the success of our students the center of each and every action we take.

I envision Western Michigan University as a vibrant institution that experiences growth in the number of students we serve, the resources necessary to support them, and in our combined efforts to speak with pride about our University, its past and its exciting future. This will be an institution that will model the very best in shared governance—where conversations will occur in a setting that encourages dialogue and expression of differences in a manner that is always civil, courteous and respectful.

I pledge to you that I will do my part to act and respond in a manner consistent with our core values. And I believe those core values to be:

- Civility
- Community
- Integrity
- Respect
- Transparency in all that we do, and
- Commitment to the highest ethical standards

Each of us can honor those core values first and foremost by making a commitment to communicate. That means both speaking and listening. We also will live those values by honoring the tradition of shared governance. And shared governance means just that--it is management of the University that is shared--not wholly the domain of the faculty or wholly the domain of the administration--nor of the staff or students. It is instead, a decision-making landscape in which we tap the talents and specific expertise of all. We communicate on all matters, but we must, in the end, defer to the wisdom of those members of our community to whom we have entrusted specific responsibilities. We must respect the scope of those responsibilities and give each other the freedom to do for the University what we have been professionally prepared to do.

And finally, and I have once again put the most important item last on my list, we will live our core values by continuing our efforts to build an inclusive campus where the focus is placed squarely on our students and where the qualities of respect and civility are demonstrated by the way we

treat our students and by the way we treat and respect each other. This is a community designed to bring out the best in each of its members. We have only to work within those parameters to see our core values at work and to show the broader community how those values can work in concert to foster excellence. Most important, as faculty and staff, we will set a high standard for our students to emulate.

Renowned educator John Gardner once observed that, "Excellence is doing ordinary things extraordinarily well." This campus must be a place where the daily work of education is done extraordinarily, permitting our students to achieve their goals under the tutelage of an outstanding community of mentors.

Opportunities and Challenges

As I said at the outset, we are a strong and vibrant University. We are strong but we need to be stronger, more resilient, more adaptable and more agile to face a changing environment. Strategic planning will assist us in charting a course in this new environment, and much good work has already been done on that front. With all of the planning elements brought together under one umbrella, we will have a blueprint for the future. But that blueprint comes with the caveat that we must remain flexible and ready to take advantage of new opportunities and ready to change course as the environment dictates. There are, however, five areas of focus that must be part of our plan.

First, we must grow our enrollment. This fall, our numbers stabilized and saw positive growth in the number of transfer students and in our ability to retain students. Both of those trends must continue. We must also recapture

our position in the international student market and focus intensely on enhancing enrollment on our branch campuses. We will do so by using a variety of tools.

- To enhance our prospects, we have already launched the first in what we plan as a series of advertising campaigns that are designed to raise awareness of our University around the state. The campaigns will focus on the characteristics of this campus found through our research to be most compelling and attractive to potential students, and representative of the WMU experience:

- The quality and breadth of the programs we offer

- The commitment of our faculty and our entire campus community to student success

- And the success of our alumni.

The campaigns will also focus intensely on both our traditions and our newest initiative--The Western Edge.

- We will establish a greater presence in Detroit and Chicago. Both cities are traditional strongholds for attracting new WMU students and both are filled with productive WMU alumni. We have let other institutions encroach on those strongholds without responding. No more. We will soon have a physical location in Detroit to serve as an anchor to our efforts there. And we will have a stronger marketing presence in Chicago.

- We will reaffirm our commitment to diversity. Great universities are, by definition, diverse communities that celebrate difference and prepare students for life in a world that recognizes that intellect, creative thoughts and ideas are not limited by barriers such as gender, race, ethnicity, country of national origin, disability or sexual orientation.

- We will continue to build on the work we have done to focus on student success. The Western Edge and its graduation compact have been attracting attention from students and parents, but the Edge is more. It is about a culture of caring on this campus. I am often asked by faculty members for details on the Edge and information about how they can become involved. The answer is simple. Every member of this University community can find a way to help our students succeed. There are really no limits to the parameters of the Edge. It is about how each of us can do our part to meet our students' academic, social and cultural needs. It is about having a true sense of community and offering the benefits of that community to every member.

Our second area of focus must be to continue to work within the realities of our state's economy but be vigilant to ensure that our University is an essential element in Michigan's strategic planning. I have been following the debate in Lansing with great concern. If you've been following it closely, you know that any "fix" to this year's state budget is just a finger in the dike. There's more difficulty to come. Let's look at the big picture here.

We have, in less than two decades, undergone a dramatic restructuring of our finances--a complete reversal of our funding sources. We have gone from being a publicly funded university receiving 2/3 of its funding from the state of Michigan to a publicly assisted institution with just over a third of its support from the state. If anyone tries to tell you your university needs to reform itself and become more efficient, look them in the eye and tell them that's what the past 20 years have been all about. There are few industries or organizations in the world that have successfully navigated such a change in fortune.

The shift is not over. We have challenges still to face.

The current Lansing debate about splitting university funding into two tiers bodes ill for the state and the well-being of Michigan's 15 public universities. I will continue to battle this ill-conceived idea that, if adopted, would lead to even more funding for three universities that already receive \$.57 cents of every higher education dollar appropriated. If we are successful in staving off the scheme this year, it will be back next year and the year after. Those promoting it do not have the best interests of Michigan higher education at heart. Their focus is a narrow one. They believe the economic welfare of the state is dependent on just three institutions--nonsense, rubbish. If Lansing wants a model for success, it should study WMU's Business Technology and Research Park. WMU is the state's most cost-effective, efficient research university, and our programs and faculty are second to none.

Our **third focus** will be on friend raising and fundraising. Our primary funding now comes from our students and their families, not the state. Support for innovative projects, new capital projects and even the funding needed to keep at the cutting edge in quality must increasingly come from private sources--donors and private partnerships.

You know that this University has been quietly preparing for a comprehensive capital campaign. Preparations were extended by the leadership transition that has just been completed. That preparation will now move into high gear as we assess how best to move this University forward and to tap what we know to be profound and intense support for what we are and what we can become. Many of you will be asked to help set priorities as we make decisions about what are the most promising areas for growth and development.

A **fourth** important focus will be to grow our research enterprise. A University of this size and stature can and should increase its current research expenditures. I know that many have asked through the past few years of turmoil whether the commitment to being a research university is still strong. It is, and it is a commitment that recognizes that extra value and edge we provide our students comes from our status as a research institution.

Cutting-edge research and the generation of new knowledge is what sets us apart from many of our sister institutions. One-on-one faculty/student interaction in the field, studio or laboratory is the added value we provide. Please know that when I talk about research, I include all forms of scholarship. I am well aware of the value that scholarship in the humanities

often comes without external financial support, but it is as valuable to our campus environment as the most heavily funded scientific initiative. I also recognize that additional resources and allocations are needed to support our research efforts,

Finally, we must focus intently on sharing with others the accomplishments of our faculty, staff and students. You will see a renewed emphasis on recognizing those among us who excel. When you succeed and are recognized in your discipline or by a broader public audience, that recognition enhances the perception of Western Michigan University.

We must also ensure that our students at every level are recognized for their work and are candidates for the most prestigious national awards. We must be on the lookout for potential academic stars from their earliest days on our campus.

Our goal is not braggadocio, but well deserved recognition for this University's place in the academic arena. We have a strong reputation now. Our focus must be on finding ways to enhance that reputation. Each of you will play an important role in doing so. This is a goal that depends on our every interaction with people outside the university--be it those we meet while standing in line at the grocery store or sitting next to us at a national conference. You are our ambassadors.

Closing

There will be opportunities and challenges in the coming years. We will engage in discussion about the wisdom of initiatives. For example, the

possibility and potential of a School of Medicine at WMU is one we will examine carefully. You may find that while others in our community ask "Why," my tendency will always be to first ask, "Why not." I have great respect for this university's rich past and even greater optimism for its promising future. Our plans will always face external and internal barriers that might seem insurmountable. Our role is to reduce barriers, address challenges, and work through our fear of change. Together, with our collective wisdom, courage, and energy, we can overcome the challenges we encounter and fulfill our aspirations.

Let me leave you with one of my favorite quotes--a line from a Nobel Peace Prize winner--no, not last week's winner. This quote is from Dag Hammarskjöld, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1961.

"Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step; only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find his right road.

Growth is the right path for Western Michigan University. Every action we take to secure growth in our enrollment, in our reputation, in research and in private partnerships is an investment in securing our future. Every action we take to secure growth means we will have new resources that will allow us to meet our strategic direction. This University's future is in our hands. Every small gesture and every large initiative will play a role in providing the sound financial footing we need to be strong and remain vibrant.

Thank you for being here today and thank you for each small act of kindness and each bold reach into the future you make as a member of the Western Michigan University community.

(Steady pace of 115 wpm=34.7 minutes)