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Kalamazoo Area Retired School Personnel

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Kalamazoo Area Retired School Personnel
Dr. John M. Dunn
Feb. 3, 2008

- Good afternoon, and thank you for that great introduction. I've been looking forward to being here and meeting you. From my perspective, the opportunity to talk with you is really the opportunity to thank the people who made sure many of the students at Western Michigan University got a strong start and arrived on campus ready to take advantage of all the resources we offer. I feel somewhat at home here, having started my career as a high school teacher in Lake Forest, Ill., -- probably around the time many of you began your teaching careers.
- I have several topics I'd like to share with you today, and I'd like to offer you the opportunity to pose questions on topics of interest to you. But I never like to get too far into a talk without reviewing some of the Western Michigan University quality markers, because it's important for everyone in this area to know about the gem of a university that's right here in Kalamazoo's back yard. My suspicion is that this is a well-versed group, so I'll take a few liberties and give you the Cliff Notes version that includes a few numbers that best define some many of our points of pride.
- Let's just call it WMU by the numbers.

-25,000 students, about 20 percent of them graduate students

-885 faculty members educated at the world's leading institutions of higher education. They're internationally recognized experts in fields that range from atomic physics and graph theory to jazz studies and geosciences.

-More than **230** programs, including **29** at the doctoral level

-We're one of only **100** public universities in the nation authorized to have a Phi Beta Kappa chapter

-More than **1,100** of our students are members of the Lee Honors College, and the credentials of those students equal or surpass those of students at the state and nation's most elite private colleges.

-WMU is one of fewer than **199** public universities in the nation judged by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to be research universities. That's the nation's gold standard for defining colleges and universities.

-We're one of only **five** Carnegie-designated research universities in Michigan--UofM-AA, Michigan State, Michigan Tech, Wayne State and WMU.

-**300**--that's the number of student musicians in the Bronco Marching Band, which is one of the nation's premier collegiate marching bands. I've watched them for two seasons now, and I'll vouch for them against any band in the country.

-And finally, **11**--Out of 15 public universities in Michigan, we offer all the resources and value I just mentioned at a cost that ranks 11th among Michigan universities.

- That sets the stage. I'm enormously proud to be the president of Western Michigan University and to be a member of the Kalamazoo community--a community that values education and a community that rolls up its sleeves and gets things done. Those are two traits that will serve us well in the coming months and years.

We may not know how or when this current economic crisis will end, but we do now that access to higher education and a commitment to helping young people succeed will pay dividends during the recovery period. Access and success are the two cornerstones to Michigan's future and Kalamazoo's well being.

Student Success

- Western Michigan University has made student success its mantra. While that sounds like something any college worth its name should do, I recall, and you may too, a time when college took great pride in "weeding" out a substantial proportion of its student body. There's the classic story of college freshmen being welcomed to campus by a dean or president who says, almost with glee, "Look to your right and look to your left. At the end of the year, one of you will be gone."

- What a waste of time, university resources, family savings and energy and self-confidence that kind of approach was. Who in their right mind would endorse such an approach today, especially at a time when our state needs well educated citizens to take advantage of the knowledge economy. Our message to admitted students is simple. "You're here because we were convinced you can succeed. Now it's our responsibility to do everything in our power to make sure you do."

- And we know that success is not just about student/faculty interaction. That's a big part of course, but every adult contact our students have--from the people who shovel the sidewalks and cook the meals to secretarial staff and residence life workers--they all play a big part in modeling adult relationships, demonstrating a work ethic and showing what it means to treat others with respect.

- The impact nonteaching personnel have is something I learned in college. It's a lesson that's stayed with me and had an impact on my entire career. **(Tell story about the two cooks who befriended you.)**

- Success in the classroom and in every aspect of life. That's our focus. We're about preparing students for every part of their lives.

Access

- Access is a word you'll hear a lot about in the coming weeks. Politically, it's tied closely to affordability. You'll hear Gov. Granholm talk about it in her State of the State address tonight. She'll link it to a call for public universities to freeze tuition. You'll also hear about it in the president's new stimulus package, which contains a call for Pell Grant increases to make it possible for students who qualify for aid to enroll and stay in college.

- I certainly share those concerns about affordability. I've already told you how low our tuition is and what incredible value students receive for their tuition dollars at WMU. But that is not nearly enough to keep the doors open to qualified students. For that reason, we're working hard to

increase our need-based aid packages on campus and to identify emergency funds for students whose enrollment is threatened by this economic crisis. That work will continue unabated.

- But I define access as more than just affordability and financial aid. I think access is about reaching out to qualified students for whom the circumstances of life make college seem like an unobtainable dream. We want those students to enroll and find success. All colleges and universities need to build the support structures that make that possible. Let me give you two examples.

- **Veterans.** This is a group to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude and an obligation to help them succeed. They need help transitioning to the classroom. Financially and logistically, a simple hand up during their first months after being discharged can make all the difference. Two years ago, we:

- Implemented a mini GI bill that makes their first semester of tuition free so they don't have to wait for veterans' benefits to enroll

- Offered them Michigan residency so they pay in-state tuition for their time on our campus

- Established an advocacy office to help them work through logistical issues and to help them and our entire campus community work through the issues that come with having people move from the battlefield to the classroom--PTSD, for instance is an area that our campus has had to learn to deal with.

- I am proud to say WMU has the largest enrollment of veterans of any of Michigan's 15 public universities. That's success and that's access
- Let me talk for a bit about a different kind of student access and success. We've just finished a two-week winter recess when almost the entire campus is shut down. This year, we made an exception for a very special group of students who now call Western Michigan University home.

Our **Seita Scholars** are students who have aged out of the foster care system and who have no homes, no family support systems or any of the other resources that help most of our students navigate the stresses of college life. What they do have is the ability and desire to succeed in college and, now, the support of Western Michigan University.

In previous years or at other schools, when the Christmas holidays came around, those students would have essentially been homeless. No more. For qualified students who are foster care alumni, we've built a program that provides tuition, a year-round home on our campus and the counseling and support structure they need to fulfill their academic potential.

We began the program last year, thinking 15 or maybe even 20 students might apply. When fall came, we had 51 Seita Scholars. The need is great very few students in the foster care system make it to college, and even fewer graduate.

-Here's are the numbers in human terms. For every 100 foster care youth, 70 want to go to college, 14 actually get there and only three or four ultimately

earn a degree. In a society like ours, this is unacceptable. We cannot afford to lose the potential of those young people.

Our program is named for **John Seita**, who survived more than a dozen foster care placements in his own childhood. He beat the odds and became a three-time alumnus of WMU, a professor at Michigan State University and the nation's leading advocates for foster care youth. He helped us design our outreach program, and we are so very proud of the way our campus and community are responding to the need. We're even more proud of the accomplishments of the students involved who are overcoming issues and challenges that are unimaginable to most of us.

- That's success and that is access.
- I could go on, but I'm sure some of you have some specific questions or WMU topics you want to know more about, so let's stop here to take those questions.

Closing

- Thank you for inviting me to be here. I hope to see you on campus. You're retired after all, and have time to take advantage of all the resources that come with having a research university in your back yard.