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State of the University

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State of the University
President John M. Dunn
Fall Convocation
Oct. 30, 2008

Good afternoon, Trustees DeNooyer and Miller, honorees, students, faculty, staff and friends.

Thank you for being here to celebrate the best of Western Michigan University. My responsibility today is to address some basic questions about the health, stature and potential of this University. After hearing the accomplishments of the seven faculty and staff members honored here today, there should be little question about the strength and viability of this campus community.

I would first like to add my congratulations to Distinguished Service Award winners Sisay Asefa (SEEsigh aSEHfa) and Abraham Poot, to Emerging Scholars K.C. Chen and Jennifer Machiorlatti (mackEEorLAHtee), to Distinguished Faculty Scholars Bill Cobern and Yuri Ledyayev (LEH-dee-ehve) and to Mary Anderson, who today is honored for outstanding teaching. Although they come from disparate backgrounds and disciplines, there is a common thread evident in the descriptions of their achievements. They all have passion for their work and complete dedication to the success of their students.

The spotlight is on these honorees today and rightfully so. But every day, members of this University community perform in ways that show the same dedication to the success of our students.

At the beginning of this semester, a young woman who was enrolling for the first time had problems traveling to campus. After a long train trip and bus ride, she arrived after 5 p.m. She had planned to schedule classes, meet with advisors and

secure housing, but at that hour, none of this was possible. She ended up in the office of Kathy Wright, administrative assistant in the Department of Geosciences, and she was visibly upset and in need of help.

Despite the time, Kathy contacted a housing office staffer by cell phone to find a place for the student to spend the night. The student was emotional, scared and tired. Knowing this, Kathy offered to take her home with her that night if campus housing arrangements could not be made. It didn't matter that it was after 5 p.m. Kathy was determined that the student feel safe and welcomed.

That housing staffer found a room for the student and delayed the paperwork process until the next day. Kathy took the student and her luggage to the residence hall and then took her around campus so she would know where to go the next day.

The honors we bestow today and the stories of many unsung heroes like the one I just shared are emblematic of the core set of values we have built as an institution.

We may face challenges in uncertain times, but there is no doubt that the state of Western Michigan University is strong and vibrant. As a community, we are on solid ground and headed toward a future we will be proud to leave to future generations of scholars and students.

Student success is theme of recent accomplishments

Today I want to recap some recent accomplishments, tackle the "vision" issue so much on the minds of the campus community, and focus on where we're headed in the short- and long-term.

My talk today is about the future, but I would be remiss if I did not spend some time reminding you how well the stage is set--what we have accomplished together since

we last gathered for Academic Convocation. Since then, we have come together as a community to focus on the item that is at the core of our mission--student success. We're seeing the rewards of that recommitment and renewal of focus on our core mission.

- **Enrollment.** This is a good news story all around. We're up 1.6 percent overall to 24,818 and up 8.8 percent in new freshmen. We have strong graduate enrollment, especially at our regional campuses, a wonderful increase in international enrollment (15.2 percent) and a strong increase in minority enrollment, where we're up 10.5 percent. While we were achieving those results, we did so with a slight increase to our incoming student credentials as well. We're already hard at work for fall 2009, and will move steadily toward building a total student body of about 26,500.
- We accomplished this because everyone in our campus community stepped up to the plate and played a role. You attended admissions receptions, greeted and assisted visiting students and families, told the University's story, moved paperwork through the system at record speed, gave directions, offered incredible service on the phone or in person, kept the campus looking wonderful, prepared incredible meals, responded promptly to e-mail questions and let prospective students know we really care about them. You've set the bar high. My basic message is twofold--Great job! And there are only 321 days until Census Day 2009!
- **Budget.** That strong enrollment increase and the tuition increase our Board of Trustees approved for this fall mean that we have wiped out a structural deficit plaguing the university for the past several years. Like each of you, however, we are watching the economic situation carefully to monitor the impact of the downturn on our University budget. I'll talk more about that

in a few moments, but it's important to note we began this academic year on firm financial footing for the first time in many years.

- **Best Buy.** We continue to be an outstanding buy for our students. As I tick off some of our accomplishments today, I want you to remember that we're doing all of this--nurturing student success and maintaining our status as one of the state and nation's top research universities--at the same time we're keeping our tuition price near the bottom--11th--of Michigan's 15 public universities.

Accountability. We've moved aggressively to make sure students and their families can easily find the information most important to them. We were the first University in the state to adopt and implement the online Voluntary System of Accountability called for by the nation's two major higher education organizations--NASULGC and AASCU. We didn't wait until we had numbers we liked. We didn't wait until we evaluated where we stood among our competitors. We posted our data and said we're proud of what we are and determined to continue to improve where needed.

Faculty contract. We spent the summer in negotiation shaping a new three-year faculty contract. Both the process and the outcome were important. There were times when both sides disagreed, but we worked through those moments with respect and arrived at compromises that will serve the well-being of our faculty and their loved ones, our students and the entire University community.

Serving new populations. We've worked hard to ensure access to our University by students who are members of groups underserved in the past--veterans, youth who have aged out of foster care, adults returning to

complete degrees or earn new ones, students who are transferring from community colleges and international students from nations large and small. We're also reaching out in important ways to students in our own community who have new opportunities because of the Kalamazoo Promise.

Expanding our research agenda. Our researchers have continued to excel, and research funding for the first three months of the current fiscal year is \$16.7 million, a remarkable figure in a tight funding environment. Our reputation for translational research continues to increase. Over the past three years, we've seen a 300 percent increase in the number of inventions commercialized, a 650 percent increase in invention disclosures and a 375 percent increase in industry/technical collaborations

Telling our story. Last year at this time, we were battling a move in the state Legislature to split Michigan's three largest universities away from the other 12--a move that would not be in the best interest of WMU or our state. We've been successful in overcoming that initiative--for now--and we've been successful in raising our profile in Lansing and elsewhere around the state. Last spring's WMU Day at the Capitol was a huge success. We'll be back there this spring. Next week, we're taking WMU on the road again--to Detroit, for a series of admissions, alumni and donor events that will culminate in a Ford Field football game pitting the Broncos against the Fighting Illini.

Student leadership. Finally, much of the reason for the past year's success is the fact we've had the support of our students. We have been blessed this year and last with incredible student leadership in the Graduate Student Advisory Committee and the Western Student Association. I'd like to

recognize and introduce Brandi Pritchett, chair of GSAC, and Danielle Harik, president of the WSA. (They stand and are recognized.)

The path ahead of us

Now I'm going to do a little dancing--and it's not in preparation for the Nov. 15 Kalamazoo version of "Dancing With the Stars." I may not be a ballroom dancing pro, but when I put on a different hat --cheerleader-in-chief for WMU--I think I can claim to have amassed some expertise.

When I first came to WMU in July 2007, and last year when we sat together for the 2007 Academic Convocation, I asked for your patience as I reflected on the "vision" you asked for. You wanted to know how I would steer the university, put my stamp on it, and take us into the future. I was uncomfortable then with the notion that any individual could come here and set aside the traditions and directions already established to impose a new vision. With the passage of another year, I not only remain uncomfortable with that notion, but now I am convinced that the issue of vision is one of perception. So let's talk about what I like to call, "the V word"--vision.

Jonathan Swift once said, "Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others."

Frankly, over the past year, I have come to believe that Western Michigan University and its incredible quality and level of achievement have become invisible--taken for granted, perhaps--by those who should know it best, members of this community.

I would propose that we are not in need of a new vision. I have quietly asked this question among our campus leadership now for several months. Do we need a new vision? What is wrong with what we are? We're:

- one of fewer than 200 Carnegie-designated research universities in the nation
- one of 139 public research universities
- home to one of the nation's oldest collegiate honors programs
- one of 97 public universities authorized to have its own Phi Beta Kappa

chapter

-home to internationally recognized programs in areas as diverse as medieval studies and physics, aviation and blindness and low vision studies, engineering management, accountancy and education. And our programs in the fine and performing arts are second to none.

I came here having known of Western Michigan University for my entire academic career. I expected to find a University of great quality and potential. But, despite that, I was not prepared for the incredible institution I found. Every week here has brought a new piece of information that makes me realize what a jewel this University is. Last year at this time, I was beginning to wonder already if we needed a new vision and whether a new vision would be more an act of disrespect to this wonderful institution and the decades of work and personal investment by many of you that brought us to this moment in time.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a vision. What we need now are:

- More **clarity** and a little help in making sure our vision is 20/20
- good **peripheral vision** so we are always aware of the breadth of our University
- some **hindsight**, so we learn from the past, and
- **focus**, to keep the success of our students always foremost in our actions.

Room for improvement--better vision

We have a vision that works. This is a University that works. We are a right-sized research university able to tread that narrow middle ground that comes with having

the infrastructure needed for our students to excel and a size that allows us to nurture young people and establish the kind of relationships that lead to student success.

That is what we are and what we need to acknowledge and celebrate. Instead of diffusing the vision that guides us, we need a laser-like focus on what we have achieved and how we can further refine our identity to achieve more.

Along with that clarity about what we've already achieved in our own areas, we must take responsibility for learning more about the achievements of our departmental colleagues. And how many of us can tell prospective students what is happening in another department in our college or in another college on our campus?

Room for improvement--refining our vision for the future

We may not need to change the vision, but we can always improve the way we carry it out. Today, I'm suggesting that we become more efficient and more entrepreneurial. We need also to embrace a larger segment of the prospective student market, and above all, we need to empower every member of this university community to take the University to the next level of achievement.

Let's talk about each of those important goals.

1) We have no choice but to be more **efficient** and do more with less. This is a university that has set the standard in this state for effective use of resources--and not without some pain. Our administrative staffing level is the leanest, by far, of any of Michigan's research universities. Our staff has continued for four years to maintain services to our students with fewer and fewer colleagues to share the workload. Our faculty has struggled with uneven losses to departments through retirement and normal attrition. We don't know all of the ramifications that the economic crisis will

have, but we know it won't be good, and we must continue to use our resources wisely.

- Efficiency means we must energize our strategic planning so that we make wise decisions and maximize the financial resources we do have. Provost Greene and his team are pursuing those efforts.
- Efficiency will mean continuing and expanding on this university's phenomenal record of energy conservation. Since 1996, we've increased our square footage on campus by 1.3 million square feet--a 19 percent increase. During the same 12 years, we've reduced our energy consumption by 17 percent. That's an amazing achievement by our Physical Plant staff, and they tell me they're not done yet.
- Efficiency will mean focusing on sustainability in every area--not because being green is the popular stance to take, but because being green is the most efficient way to use all of our resources. Professor Harold Glasser is heading a campuswide effort on that front.

2) We need to have a more **entrepreneurial** and agile mindset. As we move forward, we will be faced with opportunities that are outside what we have traditionally thought of as part of the higher education agenda. We will only be able to take advantage of those opportunities if we are willing, to think outside our normal way of operating, to work closely with the Faculty Senate to streamline the input process and be willing, at times, to simply take a leap of faith on opportunities that make sense at first blush. Too often, our process encumbers us, such that by the time we get to second blush, the opportunity is gone--sometimes captured by another institution.

As formally outlined in WMU's Mission and Goals, one of this University's goals is "To support community and regional partnerships that elevate civic, cultural, social, and economic life." Fulfilling that goal sometimes means acting with a sense of speed and urgency not routinely found in academia.

Flexibility is another way to describe the quality we need to develop. I grew up in Illinois, and for years the political icon in that state was Sen. Everett Dirksen. He was respected not only for his strongly held views, but for his ability to work across the aisle and for his ability to recognize when an idea's time had come. He once said, "I am a man of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times."

3) We must be an **embracing and expansive** community focused on the idea of serving a broad potential student body. Dr. Martha Warfield is heading the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and leading many of our efforts on this front. We need to continually expand our view and embrace those outside what we've always seen as the traditional student population. We must be inclusive.

One group of students of enormous importance to us and our state in the coming years will be students who begin their post-secondary education at our community colleges. Over the past year, we have reinvigorated our relationships with community colleges statewide and view those colleges as our partners. We must respect the decision made by students to begin their studies at community colleges and welcome them to our campus to continue their success.

We will continue to reach out to international students, with the goal of rebuilding our international student body to pre-9/11 numbers. A good working example of that effort is the partnership we launched last winter with the Dominican Republic. That nation has made a serious national commitment to higher education, and ours is one

of two universities to which it has entrusted its students. We began with 60 students last January. Today there are 149 students from the Dominican Republic here on campus.

4) Finally, and most important, we have to focus on **empowering** our students to succeed and empowering ourselves to take full advantage of every opportunity presented. When I speak of empowerment, I am talking about taking responsibility for what we want this university to be and for what we can do, individually, to make it happen. Too many of our faculty and staff members do not feel empowered to do or even suggest the kinds of changes they know will make this a better place. We have to change that mentality. Each and every one of us has a responsibility to do what we do in the most efficient and imaginative way possible. When we do that, we model the kind of behavior we want our students to exhibit now and in their own careers.

Recently, you've seen a phrase used in the University's marketing campaign--"Grab the Reins." While the phrase offers us the chance to play off our Bronco identity and traditions, we are finding it more powerful than just that. Prospective students and their parents tell us that the phrase tells them this University is a place where students are empowered to reach their full potential, to take charge of their lives and careers and to make a difference in the world. That's what we want for our students, but it's what we want for each member of this University community. Over the past 24 hours, more than 70 news stories from around the globe have recounted how leaders have "taken," "grabbed," "held," "claimed," "retained" or "demanded" the reins of governments, teams, legislative initiatives, companies, political campaigns and civic organizations. It's a universally recognized metaphor for empowerment, and I'm perfectly comfortable leading a University full of people ready to grab the reins and allow this University to build upon the talents and good ideas of each of its community members.

Challenges and opportunities

Challenges

There are challenges before us. As in past years, economic issues will continue to have an impact. Because of your work in growing enrollment and the tuition increase approved by our board, we went into the current year with a balanced budget and the feeling that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Then came September. Early in my talk, I referenced the uncertainty of the times we live in and the possible impact of the economic crisis on this University. We know very little about the long-term impact, but I can share with you a few pieces of information that may address the immediate concerns many of you have expressed.

- First, I must tell you that our business and finance staff, led by Lowell Rinker and Jan Van Der Kley, have diversified University investments in such a way that we do not share the problems of many other colleges and universities whose short-term operating funds are frozen or in jeopardy. Our managers have done a wonderful job, and we owe them our gratitude for their foresight and sound strategy.

- Other decisions made many years ago have similarly put this University on a solid footing. One such decision was keeping WMU in the federal direct lending student loan system as many of our sister institutions moved their student loan operations to the private sector. That decision allows our students to continue having access to federal loans.

- So far, our preferred lenders who provide loans for families who do not qualify for federal loans or who need to supplement those loans, report no slowdown in the availability of funds for those purposes.

- Our endowment has suffered a decrease in size similar to that experienced by any investor. It is too early to assess the impact of that decrease on scholarships and endowed funding expenditures.

- Finally, state funding is something that we must watch. A decline in state revenue could lead to cuts in the state budget for the current year. It is a possibility for which we must be ready.

Opportunities

Let me speak for a few moments about an opportunity that we continue to study--the possibility of a Western Michigan University School of Medicine. Despite the dire financial times, we do need to look to the future and continue to quickly--and thoroughly--investigate our ability to address the future health care needs of our state and region.

Last year, as I prepared to take the helm of WMU, I discovered that this wonderful University and the community that we call home have incredible depth and potential.

This community:

- boasts world-class hospitals
- has a heritage built around the discovery of pharmaceuticals and medical device development
- has intellectual capital focused on life sciences rarely found in a community this size. It offers, in short, a beautifully developed infrastructure that caused me to pose one immediate question very early in my relationship with the community:

"Have you folks ever considered building a medical school?"

I posed that question because I know our state faces a coming shortage of physicians, and because I know from experience the benefits that can come to a university's academic programs when a medical school is added to the mix. I also posed that question knowing that any such initiative could only work with private funding to launch and support it. As real as the benefits are, we must make our decision

knowing the state's fiscal status and the limited financial resources we have as a university to spend on our existing academic programs.

We've been looking carefully at the options, and I have to tell you the character of this community and its dedication to education play no small part in the equation. We are nearing an end to the work of consultants hired by Borgess and Bronson hospitals and the University to help us assess the feasibility of starting a medical school.

When it comes to the final decision, we must look at this opportunity with that entrepreneurial and agile mindset I alluded to earlier. If we determine this is a wise move, a leap of faith and commitment to the future may be needed--along with an appropriate funding source.

Closing

We have a clear vision of what we are. We have challenges to face and opportunities to uncover as we strive together to achieve our plans for the future. We must constantly ask ourselves how we can add value and quality to the institution to which we've made a commitment. That commitment comes with a responsibility to build on what those who came before us achieved.

Nelson Mandela often said, "A Vision Without Action is Just a Dream."

Let us dream together, but let us do more than dream. Let us take the kind of action that will inspire those who follow us to be comforted and rewarded by knowing that we, during our tenure, built upon the historical successes of this institution and added value, but never wavered in our commitment to excellence and student success.

Thank you.

