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Medallion Scholarship Competition

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Good morning. Welcome to Western Michigan University and to Kalamazoo. For some of you, let me also welcome you to Michigan. I am delighted to have you here on campus for our annual Medallion competition and I wish your sons and daughters the best of luck as they tackle today's competition.

I'd like to start by congratulating you as parents, grandparents, guardians, aunts and uncles, and all those who have played an important role in raising these students, your children. You have done well—increasingly well. By anyone’s standards, these young people you have accompanied here today are very bright students. In terms of standardized tests and high school grade point averages, they represent some of brightest and highest scoring students in the nation, not just in Michigan or the Midwest, but in the nation. Thank you for the critical role you played in bringing these students to this place in their lives.

**The Medallion Competition**

Today's competition, our 26th, will begin the process of selecting 15 Medallion Scholars—each of whom will receive $40,000 over four years. Each student who is here today has already qualified for a $3,000 Dean's Award, and all told, the students competing today will be offered more than $2 million in scholarships. Since we began this competition in 1984, we have awarded about $88 million in scholarships.

Today, we'll be narrowing the field of competitors to 35 who will be asked to return for a round of interviews. The competition your sons and daughters undergo here will be challenging. The essay and group problem-solving activities are designed to go beyond standardized test scores and grades. We want to review their personal
and communication skills as much as their academic capabilities. For out of our Medallion Competition come many of our campus student leaders. And our Medallion scholars along with other top WMU students go on to win prestigious national scholarships like the Truman, Goldwater and Udall awards. As a matter of fact, twice in the past three years, WMU students have won Gates Cambridge Scholarships for graduate education--that's the Cambridge University equivalent of the Rhodes scholarship. When our students go on to such success, they serve as ambassadors for this University around the world.

You'll have an opportunity to hear from some of our current Medallion Scholars and members of our Lee Honors College a little bit later in the day. I promise you'll be impressed. And I know you'll come away with a better idea of just what a diverse and gifted group our honors students are.

**What WMU offers**

I hope you have a chance to make some discoveries today as you learn more about WMU--and I predict those discoveries will revolve around the people you meet or learn about as you become more familiar with our campus. I've been here since 2007, but I've been an educator for more than 30 years and for most of that time, I knew WMU by its outstanding reputation as a research university with national and international standing in many fields.

But knowing about something from afar and really getting to know a place by being part of it are two different things. I came here ready to be impressed, and I have been. We have a wonderful physical plant and some of the best instructional facilities you'll find anywhere. Our new chemistry building, our engineering campus, our College of Health & Human Services Building and our new Richmond Center for Visual Arts are among our spectacular facilities--the finest you'll find anywhere.
But, while facilities and technology are important, it is the quality of the people who make up this university that will make all the difference in our students' lives. A university is, after all, its people. I have spent my first seven months here learning about and developing a sense of awe over the caliber of the people who make up Western Michigan University. You'll meet some of them today. If they seem like they're incredibly interested in your family and are focused on your son or daughter's success, I'll have to congratulate you on your powers of perception.

Student success is what this University is about. It is a place that has all of the resources of a much larger research University but still has kept the focus squarely fixed on teaching and making our students successful. We have more than 165,000 alumni around the world who will attest to that. In fact, we've discovered our alumni are our greatest marketing tool. They are willing to regale just about anyone who will listen with stories of the personal connections they made with faculty members here--connections that have lasted a lifetime.

Recently, a young woman who graduated from WMU in 2003 and went on to graduate school at Syracuse University was discussing a move and a new job opportunity with two of her friends--both graduates of one of Michigan's very large research universities. At one point in the conversation, all three wondered what their favorite undergrad professors would recommend.

The WMU alumna picked up her cell phone and called the chair of WMU's School of Communication, who had been a favorite professor of hers. Our alum and her former professor chatted for a bit while her friends watched and listened incredulously. "Get out. My favorite professors wouldn't have a clue who I am," one finally said. "And you can just pick up you phone and call yours--and he answers?"

That ladies and gentlemen is the WMU difference--what we like to call the Western Edge. This is a place where faculty and staff alike are focused on what it will take to help your student succeed. Our faculty members are world-class researchers who
found a University where they can generate new knowledge, teach what they've learned and have close working relationships with students. Relationships like the one I just described are a two-way street, of course. They take initiative on both sides, but they happen here with great regularity.

Who are the professors our students get to know?
• There's physicist Nora Berrah who leads an international team at Berkeley National Laboratory's Advanced Light Source. Nora schedules her teaching load so she can both focus on her research and spend time teaching entry-level physics. When the National Science Foundation wants to find ways to increase the number of women in physics, it turns to Nora for advice.

• There's historian Paul Maier (MY-ehr), who's internationally recognized as a leading authority on early Christianity. His name is in the contact file for reporters at Newsweek, ABC News and Newsday. He's our longest-serving faculty member, celebrating 50 years of service this year, and he's still going strong--and teaching freshman-level history because he loves to get students started right.

• There's geoscientist Carla Koretsky, who launched our geochemistry major; chemist Sherine Obare (oh-BAIR), who specializes in nanotechnology; and biochemist David Huffman, who's made groundbreaking discoveries in the fight against Wilson disease. They are three of our youngest faculty members and they've all been singled out by the National Science Foundation as being among academia's rising stars because of their ability to both generate new knowledge and convey that knowledge in the classroom.

All of these people are now on our faculty. This is a place where talented faculty members build their careers, stay and retire—and, even then, they keep making important contributions. That's the case with author Stuart Dybek. He retired
recently after a 33-year career at WMU in which he won a PEN/ Malamud Prize, a Whiting Writer's Award, several O. Henry Prizes, two Pushcart Prizes and the Lannan Literary Award for fiction. Just after his retirement, the MacArthur Foundation awarded him a "genius grant." That $500,000 award comes with no strings attached--just a request to keep being productive. Stu is writing of course, but he's also continuing to take time to mentor creative writing graduate students here, and he continues his role as a faculty member at WMU's renowned Prague Summer Program.

Western Michigan University is filled with people like the ones I've just described. We have faculty at the top of their game and staff members ready to help your student take advantage of every opportunity. We have programs internationally recognized for excellence, and we'll help your student graduate in a timely way and with the credentials that will help them move successfully to their next levels of achievement.

**The Lee Honors College**

There's an additional WMU benefit for a select group of students. I'd like to take a moment to mention one place on campus where our students report that their experience here is especially meaningful: the Lee Honors College, WMU’s honors program. It may surprise you to know that WMU has one of the oldest honors programs in the nation and that the academic credentials of students in our Lee Honors College equal or surpass those of students in some of the state and nation's most elite private colleges.

Do I think all of today's competitors should become Honors College members? Absolutely. If there is only one piece of advice I can give you to aid in your son’s or daughter’s success at WMU it is to become part of the Lee Honors College. The Honors College offers its students a smaller and more focused personal learning
community. They also are given priority registration so they will get the classes they want and need. In addition, they are offered the services of a full-time advising staff that will assist them from orientation through graduation; and last, but by no means least, the success rate of Honors College graduates as they apply for graduate and professional schools and professional employment is excellent.

Closing
Today, let me borrow a phrase from the Marines. We're not looking for a few good men, but we are looking for a few good students with the character, curiosity, initiative and ability to take full advantage of the opportunities that Western Michigan University presents. Our Medallion scholars are a select group. We expect and have witnessed great accomplishment from previous winners. Your student was invited here today because he or she has great ability and great promise. He or she may also have what it takes to become a 2008 Medallion Scholar, but we know already your student is on the path to success.

Please don't hesitate to let any of us know if there is additional information we can supply in the coming weeks and months. We want you to be well-informed and enthusiastic members of the WMU community.

Enjoy your day today and please convey my good wishes to you sons and daughters. Regardless of the outcome of today's competition, I hope you and they fell the kind of welcome and focus on success we want all our students and their families to feel. So again, please let me congratulate all of you. I look forward to seeing you on our campus in the fall. Thank you.