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Alumni Association’s Deans Reception Grand Rapids Downtown Campus

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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Alumni Association’s Deans Reception
Grand Rapids Downtown Campus
Dr. John M. Dunn
4/1/09

• Welcome. Thank you for being here this evening. There are some familiar faces in the crowd, and I'd like to take just a moment to add my welcome to those of you who Jamie has just recognized as being alumni with exceptional and longstanding ties to the University.

• Grand Rapids is a great city for higher education and an important one for WMU. In fact this is a milestone year for the Western Michigan University presence in Grand Rapids. This fall, we will mark our 100th year of offering college courses in this city--not always in the two outstanding facilities we now have, of course, but we have been part of the fabric of this community continuously since 1909.

- Today we have two beautiful Graduate Centers--this one and our Beltline Graduate Center

- We offer two dozen graduate degree and certificate options, including programs in education, business, engineering, social work and wellness. This fall, we're expanding, with our renowned master's degree program in occupational therapy, which will be offered for the first time at the WMU Graduate Center-Downtown.

This will be an opportunity for people in this community to earn a master's degree from one of the top such programs in the nation--and one with an 85-year track record.

• Our graduate programming here in town is important, but Grand Rapids is integral to our overall vitality and impact as an institution.

- More than 17,000 Grand Rapids area residents are alumni who, like you, contribute every day to the economic and cultural life of this city.

- More than 1,700 current WMU students are from Kent County alone. More than 2,000 additional students come from the surrounding counties that border Kent County--Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Montcalm, Newago and Ottawa counties.
• Wherever I travel these days, I'm encountering questions about the economic downturn and its impact on the University. This year and next promise to be difficult years. The governor has proposed and it is likely to be approved that all of our public universities take a 3.2 percent cut to our state appropriation.

A reduction of this level, combined with other mandatory budget adjustments, would place the University in an overall permanent budget deficit of greater than $14 million. Current talks in Lansing revolve around using federal stimulus dollars to help fill the budget holes and prevent us from having to make Draconian cuts, but stimulus money is one-time funding, and two years from now when those funds disappear, our operating budgets would literally fall off a cliff.

• We continue to use every cost-saving measure available, but the past five years of budget cuts have left us very lean and with little flexibility to avoid substantive reductions to our academic programs—something that simply is not acceptable as we prepare our students for a 21st-century knowledge economy. We will tighten our belts another notch this year, and we are also reaching out to our students, to keep them and their needs first and foremost in our planning and spending.

Already this year, we have redirected more than $3.5 million in financial aid funds into need-based assistance. Above all, though, I want you to know that we are committed to maintaining the level of quality our students deserve and have come to expect. It will be a month-to-month struggle, but, we are committed to emerging from this period with our quality and our ability to serve our students intact and ready to move forward.

• I do want to mention some of this area's legislators who hold key positions in the Michigan Legislature. Representatives Dean and Genetski both are on House Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee, and Senator Hardiman is on the Senate subcommittee. Senator Hardiman, a WMU graduate, has been especially supportive of his alma mater.

Senator Jansen, who is on the Senate appropriations committee also thinks highly of WMU and is supportive. If you have occasion to see these individuals, particularly Senators Hardiman and Jansen, please take a moment to thank them for their support of WMU.

• I always like to close with a couple of Points of Pride about Western Michigan University. I know you are all familiar with our status as a Carnegie-designated research university--one of fewer than 200 in the nation--and the fact that we're one
of only 100 public institutions authorized to have its own chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

But how does that translate into day-to-day accomplishments? What do those things mean for our student and faculty experience. Here are just two nuggets for you to tuck away and remember about your alma mater.

- Over the past three years, we have had more Academic All-Americans (6) than any other Mid-American Conference School, and our male student athletes—who study in colleges across our University—this year have the highest average GPA of any school in the MAC.

- We have three faculty members who are Fulbright Scholars this year. Among Michigan's research universities, only the University of Michigan, with five, has more. WSU and WMU have three each and MSU has two.

• It's time for me to let the deans tell you more and answer your questions about what's happening in their respective colleges. I'm grateful to the WMU Alumni Association for sponsoring this opportunity for you to talk with our deans. They're an extraordinary group of academic leaders and the faculty they work with continue to accomplish great things. Ask them to fill you in.

• Thank you, again, for sharing your time with us this evening.