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Kalamazoo County Excellence in Education Program Keynote Address

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Keynote Address  
Dr. John M. Dunn  
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• Thank you, for that kind introduction, and thank you for inviting me here this evening to be part of this celebration of academic achievement.

• Students, congratulations to each of you for being named one of this county's top graduating seniors. Let me add my congratulations to your families who laid the groundwork for your success and supported you during the years of hard work that brought you to this point. Please join me in a round of applause for them. Your faculty mentors as well have been instrumental in your success here. Let's add a thank you to them.

• Ladies and gentlemen, the term "economic stimulus" is one we hear a lot of these days. I think the 59 young people we're honoring this evening are this state and nation's true economic stimulus. They are motivated, accomplished and ready to take on any challenge the world throws at them. They are well informed, creative and open to new ideas--just what we need to turn this economy around.

• Students, you are ready for college life and ready to take full advantage of the opportunities before you. Your opportunities to play leadership roles will be plentiful. You will, however, take on those roles during a time that presents unique challenges to leaders.

Simply put. You will lead in a time when we are awash in information but not terribly well informed. And you will lead and seek out new ideas at a time when
tolerance for new ideas and opinions is really not very high. But my money is on your ability to use the values you've learned at home and will refine during your college years.

As you face those leadership challenges, I hope you take with you two essential pieces of wisdom.

• First, I hope you approach the coming years with a healthy respect for civility and a belief that divergent ideas and differing ideologies are a natural part of a vibrant society--something to be celebrated.

• Second, and even more important, I hope you continue your quest for knowledge with the full belief that ideas and the free expression of those ideas are the foundation upon which all of our other freedoms are built.

Civility
Let's start with civility. If there's one thing I hope you remember as you begin your college career, it is the message I share everyday on the Western Michigan University campus.

It is this: We can disagree. We can disagree vehemently. But while we disagree, we must always treat each other with respect. And we must acknowledge our opponents' right to express opinions at odds with our own.

That's a tough value to nurture in today's climate. We live in a time when what passes for news on many of our media outlets is really just a verbal barrage--two or more parties competing for the microphone in escalating voices.
And you may have noticed there is never resolution to those disagreements or a consensus reached. The "victorious" opinion always belongs to the loudest voice. The loser is almost always the listener.

Michigan's former governor William Milliken recently commented on exactly this situation when he said. "One thing I learned long ago is that raising the level of your voice does not raise the level of the discussion."

Former Gov. Milliken is right about volume being the enemy of quality. The most important ingredient to winning a debate is the ability to listen, to hear and consider your opponent's viewpoint and find the flaws in that viewpoint--IF there are flaws to be found. Sometimes, perhaps not often, we discover that our strongly held opinions leave something to be desired and that our opponent's position is the better intellectual match.

**Freedom of speech**

That brings me to the second important value I want you to take with you as you graduate--the right of every voice and every opinion to be expressed. Freedom of speech and expression is essential to everything we do as a society. And I'm not so sure we've been doing a good job lately of reaffirming that message.

Benjamin Cardoza, a 1930s-era Supreme Court justice said it best. "Freedom of expression," he said, "is the matrix, the indispensable condition of nearly every other form of freedom."
Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are two of five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. Today, not many people are even able to name all five--freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly and petition for redress of grievances. In fact, a study three years ago by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that only one in every 1,000 Americans could name all five freedoms--while 22 percent of Americans could name all five members of Bart Simpson's family.

A similar study by the Knight Foundation in 2005 found that most high school students took freedom of speech for granted. They agreed that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions, but when specific types of expression were offered--offensive song lyrics for instance--the students were less likely to agree that those should be protected.

For too many in our communities, the abstract concept of freedom sounds pretty good on paper. The messy business of living freedom is a different story.

Earlier this year, my campus was host to a pair of controversial speakers. Their message was disturbing and potentially hurtful to some in our campus community. I received letters and petitions challenging the speakers' credentials and the accuracy of their past presentations. I was asked to prevent their appearance.

"Surely, freedom of speech does not mean the freedom to lie," one person said. "Freedom of speech does not extend to these views," another assured me. They were fierce in those beliefs. But they were mistaken.

All ideas--the good, the bad and the ugly--are protected by our First Amendment rights. Freedom of speech does indeed extend to views we don't like. Freedom of
speech does, indeed, include the freedom to promote ideas with a questionable or nonexistent connection to truth.

The challenges to free speech I heard this spring took me back to a time when I was a teenager. The year was 1960.

- Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy were locked in a tight race for the office of president.
- If Kennedy won, he would be the nation's first Catholic president.
- In the small southern Illinois town of Pinckneyville where I grew up, the prospect of a Catholic president was not well received.

Little care was given to the feelings of the town's small Catholic population who heard teachers and others we thought we respected denounce Kennedy as someone who would turn the nation over to the pope.

- Truth was not a critical ingredient to what I heard during that election

I wasn't comfortable being part of the group that was on the receiving end of such views. I've remembered it for nearly half a century. But that episode provided a lifetime of insight. I learned that not all ideas are valid. My own identity and beliefs faced a challenge and won. The sheer wrongheadedness of the ideas I heard reinforced the rightness of my beliefs.

That is the great value that John Stuart Mill outlined when he talked about freedom of speech. He said that when opinion is silenced, those who oppose the silenced opinion suffer even more than those who agree with it. Those who oppose the faulty opinion lose the chance to gain an even clearer perception of the truth. That's why our founding fathers placed such importance on freedom of speech.
What happened at Western Michigan University this spring? The protested speakers appeared and were met with a firm, but civil, response from the students who were offended. Information was shared, reinforced and rebutted. And at the end of the evening, a large crowd walked out of the auditorium engaged in conversation about IDEAS.

For each of you, I wish many evenings of lively debate and the opportunity to continually test the ideas and opinions you learned in your first 18 years. I wish you a lifetime of in which you embrace the indispensable condition we know as freedom.

Closing
I've shared two values I urge you to adopt. Let me also suggest you find a way to share those values and your own special talents with others. Be generous with your time, talent and resources, and if you do, the rewards--extrinsically and intrinsically-- will be plentiful.

Some of the world’s most brilliant individuals--Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa to name just two--reminded us time and time again that true happiness is gained only when we give generously to others.

George Washington Carver may have said it best, "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong. Because, someday in your life, you will have been all of these."
And finally, best wishes as you graduate and good luck in the future you construct. Please know that those of us here in your home community will be watching each of you as you build your career and carve out your place in the world. We are enormously proud of you. Thank you.