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Michigan Works Luncheon Address

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Michigan Works Luncheon Address
John M. Dunn
Nov. 11, 2009

Intro

- Thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. And thank you to all of you on the front line of Michigan Works and the No Worker Left Behind program. What you do for our area, region and state has never been more critical than it is now. And I suspect what you do every day on the job has perhaps never been as demanding as it is now, and never have you encountered the level of need and desire for change that you see from the clients with whom you work.
- Western Michigan University and Michigan Works share a deep commitment to the success of No Worker Left Behind. More important, we share one overarching goal--ensuring that young people are ready for the jobs that will move Michigan into the future and make our economy strong again.

About WMU

One of the first things I always like to do when speaking to anyone is to make sure the audience knows Western Michigan University. Even people in our home community are often surprised by some of the basic facts about WMU. Too often knowing OF a university and knowing ABOUT a university are not the same.

So let's start with just the basics:

- WMU was founded 106 years ago because a group of Kalamazoo citizens and business people recognized the need for higher education in this community.
- Nearly 25,000 students attend WMU, including more than 5,000 studying at the graduate level and students from nearly 90 other nations.

- WMU is one of fewer than 200 of the nation's research universities.

Michigan is fortunate to have five such research universities--MSU, WSU, U of M-Ann Arbor, Michigan Tech and Western Michigan University.

- We're one of the nation's top 100 public universities.
- Our programs and our faculty are internationally renowned in such diverse areas as atomic physics, blindness and low vision studies, the performing arts--especially jazz, aviation, paper engineering, medieval studies, and mathematics.

Over the years, we have maintained our close connection to community needs and economic development. Our research is often translated into businesses that create jobs. Our impact on this area's economic well-being is enormous--and we intend to keep it that way,

WMU and Michigan Works

Michigan Works is our natural partner in promoting economic development for our region and providing our state with a 21st-century work force ready to perform and ready to change and learn new material as the economy changes. We focus on job skills and on critical thinking skills that make our graduates flexible, lifelong learners.

- Today, I'd like to suggest that we reinvigorate our two-pronged approach to achieving that common goal that WMU and Michigan Works share--jobs.

-First, we must continue to aggressively examine every potential program and partnership and, together, make them available to Michigan workers and young people who need to be ready for jobs in an economy that will focus more and more on technology, sustainability and constant change.

-Second, we need to refine our career counseling in a way that allows us to provide a laser-like focus, not only on the skill-sets of the future, but also on the attitudes, perceptions and misperceptions that too often prevent our young people from connecting with our state's employers.

- Let's talk about those two approaches.

Programming for the future

First of all, I applaud the work that Michigan Works and Western Michigan University have done together to identify, examine and certify programs that will truly help build the potential for economic and community growth in our region.

We began with just a handful last year. Early this year, we were able to identify additional programs and by June, we had a roster of some 35 bachelor's, master's and certificate programs at WMU that would prepare qualifying Michigan residents for bright futures. Today that number stands at 46 programs that are No-Worker-Left-Behind qualified programs.

Those programs range from accountancy and civil engineering to aviation maintenance technology and film, video and media studies. All are designed to help students acquire the skills necessary to succeed in the fast-changing global economy of the 21st Century. There is no dispute, changing direction—especially in times of economic uncertainty—is far easier to talk about than it is to implement, but change, retooling, and adapting to the new environment in which we find ourselves must be central to Michigan's strategy for economic transformation.

The sky is the limit on the kind of programs that will help prepare workers for that transformation. In the not-too-distant future, I predict you'll see additional strong

academic programming emerges as a result of a new \$1 million grant WMU recently received to support green manufacturing. That program will help businesses create more efficient and sustainable processes and products. We know new jobs will be created by that initiative, and we're ready to work with you to make sure Michigan citizens have the skills to fill them.

But No Worker Left Behind is just part of the strong relationship between Michigan's workforce development efforts and Western Michigan University.

WMU and Michigan Works are starting even earlier to help build in our young adults the work habits and skills that will help them become productive employees and employers. Last summer, we participated in the Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) program--in fact WMU was Michigan's largest site for this program, which was supersized last summer with federal stimulus funds. Our campus was recently honored by the Workforce Development Board for our work on the YOU program. We're already planning to participate again in summer 2010.

In summer 2009, we had 77 area high school and college students and other young adults working in landscaping, custodial services, Waldo Library and other departments. The WMU employees who supervised these young people quickly learned the lesson that each of you convey to your clients every day.

"This was not just about the work," said one of our supervisors, Steve Keto, "It is about the worker. We must invest in the talents of our youth, Our economy depends on it."

Steve went on to describe young workers so eager for a chance to show what they could do, that one even slept outside across the street from the campus to make sure he did not arrive late for his first day of work.

I have every confidence we will continue to identify programs that can build Michigan's work force for tomorrow. Programs like these are the bread and butter of workforce development. But just having the programs is not enough. There's an attitude adjustment that you and I have to help make them happen.

Counseling that overcomes perception

If we build our programming appropriately, students will take advantage of it. It's what happens next that has me most worried. Our students are taking their newly minted skills to other states. No matter how good a job we do to prepare students for the future, it won't help our state recover if those students don't stay here to build our economy.

A survey earlier this year by the Presidents Council of State Universities of Michigan showed that almost half of the graduates of Michigan's 15 public universities leave the state after they graduate--and half of those students who leave say they're not planning to come back--ever.

They're not even trying to find a job in Michigan, even though many of them say they'd like to live here. They just assume there are no jobs here. Depending on which survey you read, we have one of the nation's worst rates of out-migration by college graduates. Even states like Alabama and South Dakota--states with far fewer urban attractions and fewer social, cultural and physical amenities to lure young people--do better than Michigan when it comes to keeping college graduates in the state.

What we've been calling a "brain drain" is steadily worsening. The people we're losing are the ones we need most. They're young, energetic, creative and innovative. But they don't think there's a future for them in Michigan.

We have to change that perception. There are jobs in this state. People with the appropriate skills are in demand, and some employers are expressing frustration over not being able to hire the highly skilled workers they need--the kind of skills produced by No Worker Left Behind programs. Even in the heart of Detroit, with the city's unemployment rate at 28 percent, CNN reported just yesterday that jobs are available in such fields as pharmaceutical research, IT and engineering.

Years of a negative media focus on unemployment in Michigan's traditional industries, however, have led far too many young people to believe they have to leave our state to find their future.

You and I know there are jobs and opportunities here for those with the right skill sets. Our counseling needs to focus both on pinpointing those skill sets and conveying the reality of Michigan not just as a good place to work, but a great place to start a career and build a top-quality lifestyle.

As we move forward, career counseling has to focus not only on skills but also on promoting the opportunities that exist in our state. Internships and summer employment are two of the best ways to connect promising students with potential employers. Our career counseling messages have to be three parts skills acquisition and two parts Michigan promotion.

"The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes," Marcel Proust once said. Our job as counselors has to be to give our students new eyes through which to look at their state and the future that is here.

I look forward to doing that with you.

I know there may be questions from the audience, and lunch is waiting, so I'll stop now and hope you feel empowered to ask a question or make a comment.

Thank you.