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NAACP Informal Meeting

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Good evening. Thank you for asking Larry Tolbert to extend the invitation to me to be here this evening. Many of us have met in private and public events around town over the past two and a half years, so I have been looking forward to spending time with you in this gathering.

• I have several topics I'd like to share with you, and I'd like to offer you the opportunity to pose questions on topics of interest to you. But I never like to get too far into a talk without reviewing some of the Western Michigan University quality markers. I do so because it's important for everyone in this area to know about the gem of a university that's right here in Kalamazoo's back yard. My suspicion is that this is a well-versed group, and many of you are alumni or part of the Bronco family in some capacity, so I'll take a few liberties and give you the Cliff Notes version that includes a few numbers that best define some of many of our points of pride.

• So let's start with 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 88 nations around the world.
- 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 art--especially jazz, aviation, paper engineering, medieval studies, and mathematics.

And here are some important numbers to remember

- More than **230** programs, including **29** at the doctoral level.

- We're one of only **101** public universities in the nation authorized to have a Phi Beta Kappa chapter.

- More than **1,100** of our students are members of the Lee Honors College, and the credentials of those students equal or surpass those of students at the state and nation's most elite private colleges.

- And finally, **10**--Out of 15 public universities in Michigan, we offer all the resources and value I just mentioned at a cost that ranks 10th among Michigan universities. It is imperative that WMU do everything possible to make its world-class programs accessible and affordable for all students.
• That sets the stage. I'm enormously proud to be the president of Western Michigan University and to be a member of the Kalamazoo community. This is a community that values education and a community that rolls up its sleeves and gets things done. Over the years, the University has maintained its 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.

• Access and success are the two cornerstones to Michigan's future and Kalamazoo's well being. I'm proud of the University's longtime commitment to both access and affordability. Those have been our hallmarks and I see that trend continuing. There are several ways we reach out as an institution to help young people in this community and elsewhere tap their potential and seize control of their futures. "Grab the Reins" is not just a marketing tagline, it's a mantra we try to instill in students. It's our way of saying, "We're here to empower you to succeed. We'll help you secure the tools, but you need to be in charge of your future."

• I'd like to tell you about three important ways we are sharing that message—through our engagement with the Kalamazoo Promise, in our work with Michigan community colleges and through a successful outreach to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. That's our Seita Scholars program.

Kalamazoo Promise

• Let's start with the Kalamazoo Promise. Because this is our community and we're committed to its success, we've been involved since the beginning in helping ensure that our young people are college ready—prepared to fulfill the Promise.
You may know that Kalamazoo Valley Community College and WMU are the two schools of choice for Promise students. During the first few years of the Promise, together, we enrolled as much as two thirds of Promise Recipients.

• That's wonderful, but the goal of the Promise is to increase that number of students who go to college, and that can only be done by setting college as a goal for families early in the process. Students need to be preparing with the correct coursework throughout their middle- and high school years. To encourage that, I don't think there's a college at WMU that has not established some kind of program to reach out to pre- and young teens in Kalamazoo to show them the possibilities that exist.

• Our engineering college and our College of Health and Human Services have been particularly active in getting students on campus early through workshops, summer programs and tours to let them know about the full range of careers that exist and what it takes to join those professions. Not all those students will attend WMU, it’s true, but we're convinced they'll go to college somewhere. When they do, that will make this a healthier community—economically and culturally—for all of us.

• This is not about where children choose to attend college--although I'll be honest and say I hope they choose their hometown university--this is more about making sure our children fully understand the wealth of opportunity that is available to them with a college degree, no matter what school they choose to attend. We want them to begin working on the particulars--deciding exactly how they are going to realize the Promise and fulfill their dreams. Young people cannot begin too early to visualize themselves as successful students on a path to a meaningful and
fulfilling future. Dreams are attainable, especially here in Kalamazoo, where the Promise has cleared the path of many obstacles.

**Community College Outreach**

- Starting with Kellogg Community College in Battle Creek, we've begun expanding our work with students in Michigan community colleges. We now have dual-enrollment arrangements in both engineering and aviation that will allow KCC engineering students to take advantage of the resources of both schools and to move seamlessly from the associate degree program into our bachelor's degree program. This is a model we expect to replicate elsewhere.

- At Lake Michigan College--our campus within their campus is there to ensure students can stay in the Southwest area and earn a bachelor's degree.

- Our efforts are directed toward honoring the choices of students and their families, reducing barriers and encouraging community college students to sustain their education at WMU.

**Seita Scholars**

Finally, let me tell you about a program near to my heart--Our Seita Scholars Program. About six months after I arrived on campus, three people on our staff and faculty--Penny Bund, Mark Delorey and Yvonne Unrau--proposed a plan that made such sense, touched our hearts and fit the traditions and mission of Western Michigan University.

- What we needed to do, they told me, was establish an academic home and a haven for qualified students who simply do not have the extensive support network
that so many of our students have had all their lives. They easily convinced me that
Western Michigan University could be that support network and be that home for
foster care youth who have aged out of the system. We could start to level the
playing field for this under-represented group of young people.

• The need was great. We know that about 70 percent of young people in foster
care want to go to college. Only 20 percent of those in foster care who graduate
from high school actually enroll in college and only a quarter of those who enroll
earn a degree.

• Here's what that means in our state. About 500 Michigan young people age out
of foster care each year. Until now, only about 13 of that 500 would typically earn
a degree. That is simply unacceptable. We cannot, as a society, afford to lose the
potential these young people represent.

• As we developed our program, we had the support of a champion for this cause,
John Seita. Dr. Seita, is a three-degree WMU alumnus, a professor at MSU and
he, himself, is a veteran of the foster care system. He has used his academic skills
and accomplishments to advocate on behalf of young people across the country.

• We developed a program that includes free tuition for former foster care youth, a
campus support network and a home on campus year round. That last item is
incredibly important, especially at this time of year. Before this, on many
campuses, during the holidays when their fellow students head home to their
families--former foster care youth were literally homeless. John Seita tells a heart-
rending story from his own youth about being a student at a small college in
Michigan and spending the winter holiday breaking back into his dorm or living in
his car and searching for food. Campuses are simply not set up to accommodate this very real need--until now, that is.

• We began our program in fall 2008--thinking we might attract about 15 former foster care youth. We attracted 51 students.

• When we started, experts in the field said we'd be lucky to keep 25 percent of those students on track toward graduation. We've achieved 50 percent, but it's not good enough. We want all of our Seita Scholars to succeed. Just more than 50 percent of our first class of Seita Scholars were back at WMU this fall. They were joined by a new class this fall of 47 entering Seita Scholars. It's a good start, but we still have a ways to go. Some of those who left will be attending school elsewhere. Others have indicated they would like to return at some point. Our door will be open.

• Our campus community and our extended University family have embraced the work and reached out to help in many ways. A growing list of private and public organizations have signed on to support our efforts. They include:
  • The Kellogg Foundation
  • Michigan Campus Compact, one of today's sponsors, as well as,
    • The AT&T Foundation,
    • Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation of Ann Arbor, and the
    • Kalamazoo Community Foundation

• We're making a direct impact--one student at a time--on the lives of the students in our program. But this program is attracting statewide and national attention. We are seeing signs that other schools are emulating the model we've developed. In the
long run, WMU will have an impact on many more students as we serve as a model for other institutions.

**Results**

One of the outcomes of all of this work and our outreach in other cities is a trend I'm enormously proud of. At a time when too many other universities are experiencing a drop in minority enrollment, Western Michigan University is seeing its minority enrollment rise. In 2006-07--the year I first became intimately familiar with the University--our minority enrollment was 10 percent.

The next year, it rose to 11 percent. In 2008-09 it was 12 percent and this fall it rose to 13 percent.

The overwhelming factor in the growth in the percentage of minority students on campus is the strong growth in African-American student enrollment. Our actual number of African American students has increased by nearly 400 students during that four-year period--from 1,139 to 1,504.

• That's progress. And there are a lot of people at WMU who work every day to continue that progress. We're blessed to have leaders like Dr. Martha Warfield, our associate vice president for diversity and inclusion. She directs many campus outreach activities. She works tirelessly to help Promise-eligible students make the connections they need and to make sure potential students statewide connect with successful alumni who can help them set goals and stay on track to go to college and earn a degree.
• I know Martha has been honored repeatedly by this community, but I can't say enough about what an impact she has. Be sure to single her out and thank her for all she does when you see her.

• I will stop here because I'd like to take some time to answer questions you may have. There are many topics I haven't begun to talk about, but I'd like to make sure we cover the items of most interest to you--the possibility of a medical school, perhaps, or the University's position on the proposed downtown event center. Thank you for listening to some of the items that excite me and make me so proud to be WMU's president and a part of this community. Please pose questions about what's important to you.

Thank you.