Medallion Scholarship Competition Welcome

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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.

Let me start by offering a small apology for any inconvenience or parking problems you've experienced this morning. This is a large, vibrant university and there's always a lot happening. Today, you happen to be sharing the campus with about 1,000 people attending a gymnastics tournament in our Student Recreation Center, 4000-5000 who will be attending the Bronco basketball game against the University of Toledo and hundreds who will be attending a faculty recital in the Dalton Center. You'll recognize right away the benefit of such variety for our students. There is always something to do.

I want to congratulate you and thank you for the critical role you played in bringing these students to this place in their lives. You have done well--incredibly 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.

**The Medallion Competition**

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. Regardless of today's outcome though, we know already your student is on the path to success. And we want your student and your family to become part of our University community.

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.

Many of our campus student leaders come to us through this annual competition. 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 four years, WMU students have won Gates Cambridge Scholarships for graduate education--that's the Cambridge University equivalent of the Rhodes scholarship.

And earlier this week, we learned that one of our 2008 Medallion scholars--now a sophomore--is part of a WMU team that has won the iOme Challenge--a national collegiate contest asking some of the brightest minds in Generation Y to propose solutions to the nation's Social Security problems. Our team topped teams from Harvard, Boston University, St. Louis University, the Air Force Academy and many others to win $20,000 and an opportunity to go to Washington and present their plan to Congress next month. That 2008 Medallion Scholar I mentioned? She's busy making travel plans to return from her study abroad location near Paris so she can accompany her team to Washington.
You'll have an opportunity to hear from some of our other 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. 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. 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 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 for years led an international team at Berkeley National Laboratory's Advanced Light Source. More recently, she's worked as co-team leader for Atomic and Molecular Science, helping to open Stanford University's new Free Electron Laser at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center. Nora schedules her teaching load so she can focus on her research one semester and spend the next teaching entry-level physics searching for the next research star.

- 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. The success rate of Honors College graduates as they apply for graduate and professional schools and professional employment is excellent.

Closing
Finally, let me urge you to take a careful look at our home community while you're here today. This is a wonderful college town with people who go out of their way to make students an important part of the social fabric.

Over the recent holiday break last month, a thank you letter appeared among the letters to the editor in the local paper--the Kalamazoo Gazette. It was from the mother of two young people--a recent alumnus and a current student who will
graduate in April. The mom just wanted to say thank you to the people of Kalamazoo for what she called an unexpected bonus to their WMU education.

"The bonus," she said, "was having this great school located in a terrific community filled with kind and generous people who welcomed our children, made them feel at home, kept them safe and provided us with a terrific feeling of reassurance."

This, I learned later, was a lady who knew her college towns. She was a resident of one and employed at that other research university due east of here-- in Ann Arbor. She recognized the special qualities of this town and the unique ties that bind WMU and Kalamazoo.

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 felt the kind of welcome and focus on success we want all of 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.