



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

WMU President John Dunn

Office of the President

9-16-2010

State of the University Address Academic Convocation

John M. Dunn

Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn>



Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Dunn, John M., "State of the University Address Academic Convocation" (2010). *WMU President John Dunn*. 153.

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn/153>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WMU President John Dunn by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



John M. Dunn
State of the University Address
Academic Convocation
Sept. 16, 2010

Opening

Good afternoon and welcome to our celebration of achievement and our analysis of the state of Western Michigan University. We extend special appreciation to Trustees Tolbert and Miller for their attendance today. It has been my privilege to lead this university for three years now and it has been a personal journey of discovery for me--and I hope for you and all the constituents we serve as well. Thank you for your support, counsel and friendship.

I'd like to add my congratulations to all of our honorees today. And I heartily applaud the decision to expand the number of those we honor at this annual event. With the addition of our Make-A-Difference award winners this year, we are shining a spotlight on the very best of all that we do as a university community.

We are honoring outstanding performance --performance in every area-- that far exceeds the responsibilities and expectations we set for every member of our faculty and our staff. We are acknowledging that our collective success as a university is best measured by what we each do individually. Congratulations to all of you, and thank you for what you do every day to enhance our reputation and role as an institution of discovery and higher learning.

As is customary at our Academic Convocation, the president is asked to share a few remarks. I have also been asked to be respectful of time--translated to mean, "Do not be too long in your remarks." I am reminded of Hubert Humphrey, when one of his aides suggested that he might shorten the length of his comments. Humphrey replied with the quip that he never thought his speeches were too long. In fact, he had rather

enjoyed them! Well, I too, enjoy being with you, but I will be sensitive to your attention span.

My first task today is to formally apprise you of the state of the University. It is my pleasure to assure you that Western Michigan University today is healthy, intellectually vigorous, fiscally stable and on a growth trajectory that will benefit our students, our campus, our community, and our state and nation.

Six particulars outlining that status are:

- First, we are a top-tier research university with an enrollment of more than 25,000 students this fall. We now stand at 25,046--thanks to your hard work and commitment. This is an increase of 470 students. We have significant growth in the number of new students at all levels. As important as that growth is, I find myself even more encouraged by the fact that we have achieved a major increase in our freshman to sophomore retention rate-- again due to your efforts to reach out to help students during those all-important first months on campus.
- Second, we enjoy a growing reputation in our state and elsewhere as a University committed to student success, discovery, good health, sustainability and public service.
- Third, we have become the university of choice--first choice--for a growing number of our state and nation's top students. The scholastic quality of our students continues to improve.
- Fourth, we have seen a number of changes to our leadership team. Working together, we have a full complement of academic leadership--an energetic "can do" provost and a complete cadre of college deans, four of them brand new to their

positions this summer. We have a new vice president charged with uniting our development and alumni outreach efforts, and we have elevated to the vice-presidential level the person charged with overseeing our inclusion and diversity efforts.

- Fifth, while budgets remain tenuous, careful planning and the cooperation by our entire campus community have put us on solid ground. Three years ago, our annual budget reflected an \$8 million deficit. Today, thanks to you and our trustees, our budget is balanced. We put our heads down and used broad shoulders to continue pushing forward --because that's all we can do.

- And sixth, we are looking ahead and actively pursuing the path to future growth, with the prospect of a new medical school very much on the horizon and new campus facilities commensurate with our academic goals. And those goals are being nurtured as well by increases in our research expenditures and in private gifts to our University.

We are positioned for a period of continued growth--growth that builds on the strength and stability that we have achieved as a University community.

We are ready for the short- and long-term future.

One of this fall's signature events will be a visit by a team representing the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. The team will be here to ascertain our fitness to retain the accreditation we have held since 1915.

For more than two years, a team ably led by Dr. Eileen Evans, our vice provost for institutional effectiveness, has been preparing the campus for this accreditation

process. We're at the end of that preparatory process, and I could not be more comfortable with

- where we are as a university
- our self-awareness as a place of higher learning
- our ability to meet any challenge this academic year and long into the future.

Why am I so confident? In preparation for the HLC visit, we have been on a journey of self-discovery and reaffirmation. We've carefully documented our abilities to meet the requirements of the HLC, we've tightened and laid out our strategic planning in a variety of critical areas and we've reminded the HLC and ourselves of the sheer quality and total commitment of this University community.

That self-discovery and affirmation exercise, I'm convinced, is a major benefit of the continued accreditation process. It is designed to highlight strengths and weaknesses and challenge the campus community to improve where improvement is needed and to leverage its strengths as it moves forward.

Focus on discovery

I've been struck in recent weeks by how much the self-discovery process we've been on as an institution mirrors the discovery process I have experienced over the past three years. What I knew about WMU when I came here --and I believed I knew a lot about the quality of this place-- proved to be true. But it was just the tip of the iceberg. Once I dug deeper and carefully examined pieces as an insider, both the quality and the potential became much more apparent.

I am struck as well by how similar such self-discovery is to the process through which we guide our students during their years here and how much that process, in turn, mirrors what we do as researchers and scholars. There is a careful examination

of what we "know" already and the need to document and quantify that knowledge before we move to the next step in knowledge generation.

Discovery is at the heart of who and what we are. Today, if I were asked by someone to describe our university I would respond with this simple statement.

This is a place where we work together every day to be a premier student-centered institution for higher learning which is respected for its commitment to discovery.

Looking out over this audience today and having listened with pride to the narratives penned to honor the best and brightest in our campus community, I am convinced that this simple statement describes Western Michigan University. Nurturing discovery is both our current reality and our path forward.

Taking discovery into the future

Discovery is a wonderful word--broad and able to encompass all manner of human activity. What do I mean when I say we nurture discovery? One of my favorite definitions of the term comes from Marcel Proust, who said, "*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.*"

A good part of our mission as educators and scholars is helping our students discover new ways of examining familiar landscapes. Another part of our role is making sure we never let our own familiar landscapes become so firmly entrenched we stop looking at them with new eyes.

This afternoon, I suggest some discovery challenges that should be understood and embraced by the members of our University community. Some of these goals are timeless. Some are specific to where we are as a university that is an integral part of

the larger society that supports us. All of them require looking at who and what we do with new eyes.

Discovery goals for students

My first challenge is an easy one. It is a challenge to students. I urge you to take every opportunity available during your college years to discover your true academic potential. Discover who you are and how you can connect with a diverse community. Discover ways to honor your obligation to preserve our resources for future generations by making sustainable, healthy choices now and in the years to come.

Students, as you work to meet that challenge, be assured that we as a University community will continue to challenge ourselves to build the kind of learning environment that is inclusive, respectful and focused on helping you discover your full potential. We pride ourselves on saying daily "It's about you, our students, and your successes"!

Discovery goals for staff members

For our University staff members, this will be a year of both challenge and opportunity. By the end of the calendar year, we will have lost to retirement 111 long-term staffers who take with them collectively some 3,000 years of institutional wisdom and history. Many of those retiring were leaders in their respective units. They will be missed, and we wish them great happiness and success as they move to the next chapters of their lives.

For those of you who remain active members of our staff, I ask that you dig deep to discover your own leadership potential, as you become the University's new senior staff members. If you play a supervisory role in an area that has lost one or more staff members to retirement, I ask you to be creative and work with your colleagues

to discover common needs and thoughtful new ways of looking at our work place. As we contemplate replacing retiring workers, I ask that you look at our landscape with fresh eyes and help us discover ways to not simply replace our former colleagues, but also to re-envision the roles and skill sets needed to keep us moving forward and serving our students and each other.

Discovery goals for faculty

Our faculty's role at this University revolves around discovery. To my faculty colleagues, I would simply say that your success in the laboratory, the studio, and your creative and scholarly output speaks for itself. On a daily basis, you discover new ways to marry the knowledge you are generating with the rigors of teaching. What you do every day speaks in ways so powerful that my first instinct is simply to reiterate the immense pride I feel in being the leader of the great university that is your academic home.

BUT, I am not without words of challenge for you as well. And that challenge involves discovery of ways to think outside the box we have constructed around our traditional academic way of life. The challenge for us as a faculty is to discover how what we do so well continues to fit into the bigger picture of the society in which we exist-- into the lives of the people we serve. And we must continually communicate our desire to serve our constituents even better.

Our challenge is to avoid saying to ourselves that the way we have always done things is best, and that academia is an unchanging island in a tumultuous sea. Those very tempting sentiments are in fact a threat to us in some very real ways. There are some in this state who believe that having 15 autonomous public universities is a poor use of state funds and we should be joined into a single system run centrally

from Lansing. They are ready to seize on any perceived inefficiency or duplicity of effort as evidence that change is needed.

They are wrong, of course. That very autonomy in our higher education system is one of Michigan's greatest strengths and must be preserved. We must preserve what is best about our system but be prepared to recognize that there is room for us to improve as well-- more efficiencies to be had, more ways to serve our constituents and more ways to collaborate across the disciplines and among institutions.

We need to review how our responsibilities to our students, state and nation have changed. We need to discover ways to honor the differing academic paths students take as they come to us. We must be ready to critically examine our way of doing business and look at:

- How readily we will work with students transferring credits and taking prerequisites from other institutions
- How committed we are to the individual success of every student we accept
- How willing we are to collaborate and recognize the strengths and opportunities that exist among our sister institutions.

At the same time, we embrace new students who know that a college education is now a prerequisite for success, we must examine carefully the barriers we sometimes erect or keep, unexamined, as holdovers from another era.

We need also to celebrate the strengths of our sister institutions in ways that are more on the leading edge. We should investigate opportunities that allow students to move back and forth among our state institutions without penalty so they can take advantage of the very best that we all have to offer.

In Europe, such a system is being implemented as a part of the larger Bologna Compact. There are institutional and discipline-specific quality ramifications to such explorations, to be sure, but we should never be afraid to be part of the discovery process that could help build a new learning paradigm--and continue to demonstrate our commitment to innovation and student success.

And finally, I will suggest a discovery goal for our community.

More than 107 years ago the citizens of Kalamazoo rallied and fought to have what has become a great university housed here in Kalamazoo. The challenge now is to ensure that our city remains on the leading edge and is able to fully leverage its legacy in the life sciences to grow into the vibrant economic entity we know it can be.

There is a new opportunity on the horizon --a medical school that can marry all of our community assets into a unified, focused initiative that will have an incredible impact on our growth, well-being, fiscal stability and sense of community purpose.

In the coming months, I ask that you give thoughtful consideration to the information that continues to pour forth. Become informed. Become an advocate. Discover what you can do to set the course of progress for another century of achievement.

Closing

In closing, I want to tell you that I have been carefully examining the great seal of Western Michigan University lately and thinking about how prescient those who developed and adopted it truly were. You remember the elements--a deeply rooted pine tree, an incomplete arch, a pyramid topped by the lamp of knowledge and five stars to symbolize our five original colleges. The more I examine it, the more convinced I am that discovery and all that it entails is at the heart of that image that

represents us so well. It's simply a matter of looking at that familiar landscape with a fresh set of eyes.

What I see is:

- Five stars with room to add more as we discover new opportunities,
- A pyramid that symbolizes the building blocks of knowledge, with a flame that signifies the joy and enlightenment that comes with discovery,
- An incomplete arch that reminds us that discovery is never complete, and
- A tree that keeps us rooted in our culture even as it soars to the heights of new discovery.

I urge you to look at what we do and who we are always with fresh eyes and an open mind and heart. I ask that we all recommit ourselves to the joy of discovery.

*Western Michigan University
Dalton Recital Hall
Sept. 16, 2010
3:30 p.m.*