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Center for the Humanities Panel Discussion
John M. Dunn
Oct. 28, 2010

- Studies in the Humanities at WMU have a strong track record that dates back to this University's commitment to general education and its internationalization efforts, both of which began in the 1950s. I would submit that this University has continued and expanded its efforts in languages and international affairs, and preserved its long tradition in many other areas that we would call the humanities.
 - Growth in language and cultural studies to include Chinese and Arabic (Establishment of Confucius Institute)
 - Preservation and continued growth in our core strengths in areas like the Arts and Medieval Studies
 - Continuance of general education requirements

- We do the humanities well here, and I support the establishment of this center intended to continue to keep a thoughtful discussion going as we move forward.

- We might do humanities well, but we have issues to address. Today we have programs in decline as students shun some disciplines as majors--many for economic reasons. I won't name those programs, but we all know what they are.

- We also find ourselves in the position of having majors that have so many requirements that there is literally no room in a 4- or 5-year schedule for students to do what every student should do--explore, take a philosophy class, study art history, satisfy their curiosity about archaeology or take Italian. We are increasingly putting our students on a tight schedule.

- The threat today, particularly for a public university, is compounded by a perfect storm that is made up of:

- continuing disinvestment in higher education that has resulted in higher tuition

- a dramatic increase in the proportion of people who recognize higher education as a prerequisite to success but who may come from families without a significant college-going culture.

- Families and policymakers look at increasing tuition and demand that we find a way to get students through the degree process in a quick efficient manner. They bring a consumer's view of education as a purchased product into play. The simple truth is that for many, maybe most, a college education is all about getting ready for a high-paying job.

- We can't pretend that sentiment is not worthy of our attention. We can't dismiss the desire for college credentials that lead to employment. We need to work in that reality rather than confine our debates to campus discussions and the pages of the Chronicle and the New York Times.

- We're educators. We have to address the lack of interest in some humanities disciplines head on. And quite frankly, it is not new. In 1956, when this University founded its general education program it was done amid the same clamor. Here's a passage from Larry Massie's history of the University.

"Also in 1956, Dr. Robert Limpus was appointed director of the Basic Studies Program. Amid a near-constant barrage of student resentment over having to take courses that were not directed at their specific educational goals, Limpus campaigned long and hard to insure that Western graduates had attained a

university degree that provided 'the knowledge, the techniques and the desire to live a reflective and discriminating life''

- We have an obligation to inform--not just our students, but groups like student families, community leaders and legislators as well. We know the value of the humanities. We have to be ready to communicate that value to families who often do not understand all that a university education entails and what the benefits of that education can be and have always intended to be.
- To communicate that value, we may be best served by finding allies in business--successful people who can speak to the value that they found in their own liberal arts background and who can speak to the importance of valuing that background in the people they hire today.
- Last month, a Wall Street Journal survey found that the nation's top employers no longer consider ivy league graduates as the best recruits, but have shifted their attention to large public universities. They have come to value research partnerships and collaborative work that brings them into contact with students early in students' careers.
- But in that WSJ survey, employers also said they were still looking for bright, well-rounded students who had core competencies in their disciplines AND the breadth of knowledge that make them valuable to the companies.
- We need to nurture and leverage information like that to build the case for the humanities and help our audiences understand our commitment to a broad liberal arts background. They need to view the humanities as essential to success as accounting or engineering skills. Their perception of the University should be that it is a place where technical skills and the humanities are joined at the hip--where a comparative

religion student might want to broaden her education by taking an engineering course, or an accounting major could surely benefit from a minor in philosophy and professional ethics.

- Possible solutions to what's been called a "crisis in the humanities"--some carry opportunities and dangers to our traditional way of viewing what we do.

- a voluntary university core curriculum applicable statewide and with an intense focus on the humanities--put the power of all Michigan universities behind the argument for a liberal education.

- more inter-institutional collaboration--centers of excellence in humanities disciplines and/or shared resources and faculty to ensure broad availability of courses.

- a rethinking of our general education approach and offerings that preserves traditional offerings but recognizes new geopolitical realities as their modern equivalent.

- reaffirmation of American studies in a way that sets the stage for a new set of international and comparative studies--provide a basis for comparison.