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WMU International Programs Council: Importance of International Students at Western

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• Good afternoon. It's good to be with you. Thank you for inviting me back to speak to you--I always see a second invitation as a good sign--an indication that you liked what you heard the first time around.

• It's been about 16 months since we had our last conversation. On the international front, a lot has happened. For some of you, your home nations have experienced change and challenges. Today, especially, as we look at the natural disasters of earthquake and tsunami in Japan and the Pacific ring, we are all watching with deep concern and sympathy for those of you who are far from home and whose families may be at risk. *(Fall enrollment shows 38 Japanese students this academic year.)* We want to help you through those uncertain times in your lives with advice and logistical support in contacting your loved ones. Please let us know what we can do to help.

**Recent international growth**

• On this campus, our international connections have grown and flourished since we last met. When last I was here, for instance, we had just formally launched our Confucius Institute. That resource is now an integral part of not only our campus, but our community as well.
  
  • Our Chinese language teaching capacity has increased
  
  • School children in Portage are enjoying the benefit of language instruction
• There is a regular and robust schedule of Chinese cultural activities. Next week for instance, a famed Chinese mezzo-soprano will perform at our neighboring Kalamazoo College.

All this is because of the agreement between WMU, the Chinese education ministry and Beijing Language and Culture University. I was able to return to China a few months ago to report on the success of our relationships.

• When last we met, an agreement between WMU and the Dominican Republic was quite new. Again, that linkage is blossoming. Today we have some 140 students from that nation as part of our campus community.

• Over the past months, I've had the opportunity to travel internationally. Wherever I go, I encounter proud WMU graduates--citizens from other nations and U.S. citizens working abroad. What they all have in common is a passionate commitment to this university and gratitude for the outstanding student experience they had here.

• What does this all mean? It means your numbers--our international student numbers--are slowly growing. Today our university has nearly 1,300 students from 94 nations--that's a small gain in our total international population and a net gain of four nations. I welcome those increasing numbers and would welcome a return to our traditional role as a home to as many as 2,000 international students.
• I know I told you about my personal commitment to international education and the enormous value I see in having all of us live and work with people from different cultures. As a young student from a fairly insular Midwest community—a place called Pinckneyville, Il.—my world was literally transformed by the opportunity to study on a diverse campus that welcomed students from around the globe. When I had opportunities to live and work with international students like you when I began my studies at Northern Illinois University.

• It literally changed my life. As a result, I have been a strong proponent throughout my academic career of robust global education. I want U.S. students to travel abroad—to study in your home nations—and I want a large contingent of international students here on our campus to help all of us broaden our horizons and help us promote understanding.

• You bring to our campus an incredible sense of vitality. You may come to us to expand your own horizons, but your presence here expands the world for many of our students. And your activities make an incredible impact in our community. In fact, your signature annual event—the International Festival—attracts thousands of community members to our campus. That popular event—and I know you are preparing for next weekend's event now—has become one of Kalamazoo's most popular annual family events.

• Thank you for your generosity and willingness to share your nation's culture and cuisine with so many in this community. We are all the richer for it.

**Diversity demands an international presence**
• As a university president, I am often asked about diversity on campus. I think the questions are sometimes too narrowly focused. When those questions are asked, they often are grounded in concerns about whether we have a diverse group of students from our state or from the rest of this nation. I hold the term "diversity" to a much broader meaning. Diversity means building a campus community that welcomes students from every nation, every religion and every cultural background.

• In fall 2009, I spoke on campus about the health of this University. I suggested that we would become and remain strong if we focused on three areas:
  • Sustainability,
  • Diversity, and
  • Enhancing our Strength and Health.

• In that speech and many times since then, I defined diversity in its broadest terms. Diversity demands first that we commit to access for the broadest range of deserving students, and second, that we commit to the development of the full potential of each person we bring into our academic community. Our ability to demand and honor civility and respectful discourse will be our most important ally in nurturing the full potential of the students we bring here.

**Economic impact**

• Those diversity questions often come when I am away from campus speaking. In recent months, I've had the opportunity in writing and speaking to business
groups, for instance, to outline another benefit that the presence of international students--you--brings to our communities.

• As I've already mentioned, you bring an incredible diversity to our campus, but I think people in our community and state often overlook the fact that having you living here and traveling around the state brings enormous economic benefit to Michigan. I am not shy about reminding people of your contributions to our state in this regard.

• According to the Institute of International Education's annual Open Doors study, Michigan ranks eighth in the nation as a destination state for students from other countries. During the 2009-10 academic year, 23,617 international students chose to attend Michigan colleges. According to the IIE report, the economic impact on our state and its communities was $592 million.

• That economic impact comes from tuition and living expenses for you and your families. It also results from the impact of having your family members from home visit during your years here.

• With a network of 15 public universities and smaller colleges covering the state, many communities welcome the impact of student spending. Communities without a college or university still see the benefits, as you become Michigan tourists during semester breaks.

• The overwhelming impact, however, is focused on the communities that house our research universities. Of the 23,617 international students in Michigan, 61
percent--14,533--are attending just four research universities. The University of Michigan, Michigan State and Wayne State universities, and Western Michigan University, respectively, have the four largest international student populations, ranging from 5,700 down to 1,300.

**Closing**

You bring to our university your cultural and historical backgrounds, your international insights and your economic contributions. But most of all, you bring the possibility of friendships and connections that will last for decades. Twenty-five years from now, I expect whoever is the president of Western Michigan University to meet you in your home nations and to come away from that meeting with the feeling that he or she has just met an alum who is passionate about the impact that this university had on your life. And I hope that 25 years from now, you return for a visit and, perhaps, to visit your own children who are studying here.

Thank you, again for inviting me here, and thank you for what you bring to our university community every day.