3-24-2011

Presidential Scholars Keynote

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• Good evening. This is one of my favorite events of the academic year, and it is happening during a week that can only be described as one that has far exceeded my personal excitement threshold. As I look out over this gathering, I see a group of students and their support networks--parents, families and faculty mentors. You are proud and full of anticipation--and dressed for the occasion as well. You look like a million bucks--no, this is a week for superlatives. Let's make that $100 million.

• This week's news--a $100 million anonymous gift to Western Michigan University--was spectacular. It will help raise the profile of this University. Every increase in visibility and reputation for this university means the degree you receive here will steadily increase in value--and that degree is already one that holds great power in so many circles. I know you will talk about your years here with enormous pride, and I hope this week's news increases that pride and gives you bragging rights when you talk about our University with your family and friends.

• How many of you came here as freshmen in the fall of 2007? (Ask for a show of hands.) I thought so. I've been thinking a lot about your class lately. You are the first class of students I will have seen go all the way through this University. In a very real sense, we were freshmen together--I just happened to be the new president on the block.

• When we first gathered at Miller Auditorium in August 2007, I told you that when you earn a degree from WMU, you'll have a degree that will open doors
and give you an edge in life. Since then, I've worked hard every day to ensure the value of that degree has increased--along with the reputation and profile of this university. I think we've made that happen and we're not done yet.

- At that long-ago freshman welcome event, I urged you to take advantage of the entire range of opportunities that can be found here. As I look at this evening's program, I see that you took my advice and ran with it. Your short bios are certainly filled with academic achievement. That's appropriate--you've just won the highest award your department and this university can give to an undergraduate.

- Just as gratifying to me, though are the accounts of how you have made it your mission to be deeply engaged in the life of this University community. You've been able to soak up the best of the technical aspects many of your disciplines require, but you've been able to appreciate the arts and the humanities and, most important, to reach out and serve others and engage in thoughtful and civil debate.

- It's that depth and breadth of your university experience I'd like to talk about this evening. I think what you've accomplished shows we are getting it right here. While we want you to find a great job after you graduate or gain admission to the graduate school of your choice, our mission is about so much more than giving you a set of job skills. Job skills change and become obsolete in a heartbeat. We've tried to educate you to be whole human beings--engaged citizens with critical thinking skills and the ability to adapt, grow and work as part of a team. We want you to leave here as an advocate for the power of an education that balances the arts, humanities and sciences. If we haven't done that, we've missed the mark and failed to fulfill our obligation to you.
• But I'm confident that you get it. What you've learned here has prepared you for the long term. And I think that view has always been the power behind our most successful alumni. Here's an example:

• One of our alumni, Dennis Nally, today holds the reins of an international powerhouse – PriceWaterhouseCooper. Do you think the accounting skills Dennis learned here 36 years ago gave him everything he needed to succeed? I don't think so. And neither does he. He enrolled in and enjoyed a few accountancy classes, but did not even decide on accounting as a career until his senior year at WMU. When he visited here two years ago to speak to our students, he told them that what has stood by him all these years was the broad-based education he received as a WMU undergrad. It provided a solid foundation, he said, for any business career.

Another example: WMU Trustee and Alumnus James Hettinger is internationally known as an economic development guru. Ask him who was the best professor he had as a student here at WMU, and he will tell you it wasn't someone in economics, business or political science -- although they were top notch. His favorite was someone who had a lasting impact on his world view --- his ancient history professor, Dr. Paul Maier.

• Another alumnus, Keith Walker, has been a successful high school music teacher and band leader for 24 years. He's now teaching in Zeeland, Mich., and he recently wrote an opinion piece for the Holland Sentinel that recounted a troubling trend. He described a student who was planning to become an
attorney. That student, already focused in high school on the skill set he would need to get into college and law school, wanted to drop band in order to take classes that would advantage him in his quest to become a lawyer. Band Director Walker pointed to former students who had succeeded in a variety of disciplines. He wrote of an award-winning clarinet player who won a music scholarship to attend college, then went on to be accepted in medical school after an interview that focused not on how she did in chemistry or biological sciences, but what she had gained from her music career.

"At least two former students are lawyers," Walker wrote. "Several engineers. A doctor. Teachers. A submariner. Moms. Dads. A pharmacist. One will be a coroner some day. A future orthodontist. None of those careers were helped by taking band. But I firmly believe that all of their lives were."

- You have been students here in turbulent economic times, and you will graduate in continuing turbulent economic times. Largely, but not completely because of the economy, the entire nation is engaged in a debate about what colleges should offer and demand of their students. The humanities, in particular, are under attack as colleges respond to the demand for technical education at the same time they are forced to make deep and troubling cuts to programs. Three foreign language programs, the classics and theatre programs have been cut recently by the State University of New York-Albany. Howard University will end majors in the classics, anthropology and other fields in order to place greater emphasis on STEM training and Africana studies. Members of Congress have sought citizen input on which grants, most of them in the social and behavioral sciences, should be cut from the federal research budget.
There is emerging a call to end higher education as we know it--or as one pundit put it, "to lower higher education." Here at WMU, we've made a commitment to preserve our core academic mission and support the kind of choices that you've been able to make. You are examples of the benefits of a broad-based education. I hope you become advocates for such education in your communities, your state and your nation. This is not a discussion that will end soon.

Step back, please, and look carefully not at whether the science or the arts are most important, but rather at the issue of balance. If we prepare engineers with no appreciation for history, the arts or language, then we've failed. But we've also failed if we prepare philosophers, writers or historians with no appreciation or working knowledge of mathematics and science.

Earlier this month the stark contrast in views about our nation's educational future came down to a classic PC vs. Mac moment--literally.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates spoke to the nation's governors at a Washington, D.C. conference and urged the governors to look more deeply at how they spend their education dollars. How cost-effective is the support for some disciplines.

"The amount of subsidization is not that well-correlated to the areas that actually create jobs in the state -- that create income for the state," he argued. He urged the governors to break down that funding and focus on the categories of programs that "help fill jobs and drive the state economy in the future."
A few days later, Apple's Steve Jobs fired back with a not-so-gentle swing at his rival Gates' philosophy. He introduced his own company's latest products, which he called "post-PC devices."

"It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough," Jobs said. "It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing."

There you have it. Is it science and technology or humanities and the arts? I think you know the answer. It's both. It's the complete human being who always remembers the past, knows how to engage the present, and is prepared and eager to stretch to meet the future. That's the idea around which American education was conceived and founded.

In 1781, one of our founding fathers, John Adams, wrote to his wife Abigail and outlined his own view of education.

"I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce, and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelaine."

He was talking about balance and human progress--supporting disciplines needed to move forward, but always celebrating the disciplines that give us joy and make us whole human beings.

**Closing**
Four years ago, when I first met many of you, I challenged you in one additional way that is all about balancing technology and making personal connections. I asked you to make sure as you walked across campus that you kept your eyes up and your attention focused on the people around you. I asked you to make eye contact and to greet the people you passed on your way to class. The cell phones, iPods and other electronic devices are always in evidence, of course, but you've managed to honor that request and I've been so proud of the atmosphere we've developed here together. We've become known as a "heads up" campus--a friendly place where people connect and find respect and friendship.

Please take that commitment to other people with you as you move on to the next chapters in your lives. You are our ambassadors to the larger world. We're proud of you already, and I hope your pride in our university continues to grow as you discover just how well your Western Michigan University education serves you.

Thank you.