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Michigan Geographic Bee

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Good afternoon.

• All of us here at Western Michigan University are excited to have you here today and pleased to be the host--for the fourth year--of Michigan's statewide Geographic Bee. As I look around this morning, it looks like you're all pretty excited, too--and very ready.

• There are 108 of you from more than 80 cities across Michigan. You come from public schools, private schools and home schools. Each of you proved your knowledge of geography by winning a local competition to be eligible for today's state-level competition. You won your school bee and you were among those with the highest placement on National Geographic's written test.

• Whoever wins today will go to Washington to compete in the national bee. And we have high hopes for whoever that person is. Last year's Michigan champion, who won his title right here in this room, is competing here again today, hoping for a trip back to Washington.

• Michigan has had four national champions in the 23-year history of the national bee. Michigan's last champion won the national title in 2002. In 2009, we came close once more when the Michigan winner became a national finalist--again someone who won the state competition right here at WMU.
• Whether or not you win and move to the next level, I hope you enjoy your day on our campus, and I hope you view it as a preview of the kind of opportunities that are in your future. No matter what kind of community you come from and no matter how much you already know about the world's nation's, cultures, economies and people, I guarantee your world will be changed forever when you go to college and have the opportunity to live, study and work with people from all of those countries. I know, because I experienced the thrill of having my world expanded beyond my dreams when I went to college. It left me changed forever. Today, it's my privilege to lead Western Michigan University, which has students from more than 90 nations this year--and I learn something new from them every day.

Because geography is your passion, because it's April Fools Day and because you are all much smarter than the average middle school student, I'd like to share a story about a practical joke with you.

There's a popular quote that for years was attributed to Albert Einstein. It goes like this.

Albert Einstein once said, "As a young man, my fondest dream was to become a geographer. However, while working in the customs office I thought deeply about the matter and concluded it was too difficult a subject. With some reluctance I then turned to physics as a substitute."

As I said, that quote is often attributed to Einstein. However, this quote was actually written by Duane F. Marble, professor of geography, at the State
University of New York-Buffalo. Dr. Marble and the rest of the geography department had moved into a building previously occupied by just the physics department. The physics department, upset at losing space, gave the geographers a less than warm reception. So Dr. Marble made up that quote, said it was from Einstein and posted it on his office door.

He had the last laugh, showing the physicists in the building just how much they knew--or didn't know. Not one of them picked up the clue Dr. Marble embedded in his made-up quote. Einstein, as you probably know, worked for the patent office, not the customs office.

Be alert, be on the lookout for clues wherever you travel and have a wonderful competition. We're counting on you to represent our state well in Washington.

Thank you.