Learner Centered, Discovery Driven, Globally Engaged: State of the Union Address

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Opening

Good afternoon. It's my pleasure to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you this afternoon. Let me first pay special tribute to the Chairman of our Board of Trustees Dennis Archer. He drove here from Detroit to be with us today and to help us honor these marvelous people.

I am pleased that you joined us this afternoon to help celebrate the achievements of our colleagues. Listening to the accomplishments that made them honorees, I was struck anew by the spirit of this University's greatest asset--its people. And I am so proud to lead an institution made up of extraordinary professionals like the ones we honored today.

I add my personal congratulations to all of our honorees, and I ask them all to stand again for a moment. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in offering just one more round of applause for these 12 people who have served so well and have earned 2011 honors in their respective award categories. Thank you.

Before I begin, I want to note that I took great pains with my attire this afternoon. I thought it imperative that I look a bit more presidential than the last time many of you saw me--last Friday at Bronco Bash. Those of you who greeted me that day, perhaps noticed I was wearing a "WMU Swimming" T-shirt--a gift from our Swim Club whose booth I visited early in my Bronco Bash visit. At home later that evening when I took off the shirt, I saw a message on the back that I had not
noticed earlier. "Get Wet. Get Sexy." That's the message your president was wearing that day.

I have a somewhat different message to share this afternoon. As is the tradition with a "State of Any Organization" speech, there is one clear and defining statement I must make that sums up the important facts, challenges and directions I'm here to share.

The state of Western Michigan University is strong. As a University community, we are united, vibrant, resilient in the face of challenge, and committed to working on behalf of our students, each other and the broader communities we serve.

**Enrollment**

We are a university with an [official](#) fall student population of 25,086 students who come to us from across Michigan, around the nation and more than 90 other nations. That figure--again 25,086--is our official fall enrollment. I extend my personal thanks to all of you for working to recruit and welcome this year's student body.

The new overall enrollment figure represents pinpoint accuracy by our enrollment forecast team, which for months has projected stable enrollment or a slight enrollment increase. We are up exactly 41 students. Along with the fulfillment of those amazingly accurate projections, we find ourselves looking with interest at emerging trends in the makeup of our student body. This year's WMU student numbers reflect:

- fewer traditional beginning freshmen, but an increase in transfer students;
- a continued explosion in the demand for our online courses, up more than 14 percent;
• a 10.2 percent increase in the number of minority students;
• a dramatic increase in the number of our international students--10.5 percent above last year's number;
• more students who qualify for the Lee Honors College; and
• maintenance of the strong graduate numbers we reached last year.

This year's students are bright, slightly older, diverse, technically savvy and globally connected.

Our student body reflects the fact that the number of graduating high school seniors is now diminishing each year, and many Michigan families have left the state. For those who remain, community colleges continue to provide an attractive and affordable starting point for higher education, with this University as their ultimate destination. The influx of international students reflects the regard in which this University is held across this nation and in many other countries around the globe. And our continuing ability to attract the very best students for our honors programs--and that program's 40 percent increase in size over the past three years--shows that our outreach, marketing and profile enhancement measures are working.

These changes to our student demographics mean we must continually change as well. We must be willing to be flexible in how we work with and welcome prospective students. We must partner with them in their hometowns and home nations, in their high schools and community colleges. And we must be willing to take the classroom experience they want even more fully to their computer screens.

The fact that we are remaining strong in this time of economic stress is an indicator of one other important quality about our University. We have a well-deserved
reputation for being a campus in which people are recognized, acknowledged and embraced as valuable members of our campus community. We have honed that reputation to near perfection. I say, "near perfection," because we're not there yet, and we can always do more.

Our students proudly speak of being a "heads up" campus where people routinely greet one another. Families feel it when they visit. More than one new faculty member has noted the warmth of his or her reception into the WMU and broader Kalamazoo community. On its face, it may seem like a small thing, but I am convinced it is an enormous factor in our success. As a nation, we are in a time when there is a palpable hunger for human connection and recognition. We need affirmation that we are important to those around us, and our views and contributions are valued. People who visit find that here and as a result, they return.

We have a strong foundation in meeting that very human need to touch and personally engage. In the coming months and years, you will see us use that foundation to reach out to those in our communities who are connected with us but not as fully engaged as we--and they--would hope. Our alumni, friends, community partners and business connections are among those we will reach out to and bring more fully into our University family.

You'll remember that last fall, we were visited for our 10-year accreditation review by a peer-review team from the Higher Learning Commission. As the team departed, its members left us with an impressive list of accomplishments they found when they delved deeply into our campus and surrounding community. I'd like you to think about these traits in light of the items I've just mentioned about enrollment and our ability to connect and serve. The HLC team found:
• high student satisfaction levels;
• a committed University "family;"
• accomplishments in sustainability and energy conservation;
• seamless community engagement;
• outstanding internationalization efforts; and
• exceptional attention to such student populations as veterans and former foster care youth.

In other words, that HLC team came and found evidence of our ability to connect and engage and build community. They went away impressed with what they found. And you are all to be congratulated for making that possible.

**A streamlined strategic plan**

One item not in place when the Higher Learning Commission visited was a concise and universally understood strategic plan. We are regularly engaged in planning at every level of this University, but we had not taken the final step of synthesizing those plans into a document that is widely shared and readily identified by every segment of our University community. Such a document should outline in simple and compelling terms our identity and mission and our future direction.

I am enormously pleased and thankful to Provost Tim Greene, who has led the effort to bring such a plan nearly to completion. He worked with a broad swath of University faculty and staff members and students last spring and summer to carry out my charge to the group. I asked them to:
• work collaboratively and swiftly to formalize a plan that embraces both opportunities and challenges.
• establish a clear vision and direction for WMU
• render a living and useful plan that will guide the University
• identify and connect our core mission and values with our goals.

Provost Greene and the strategic planning group accomplished all of the tasks laid out. They moved quickly, re-examined our vision and mission, sought input throughout our community, laid out achievable goals, and developed a concise plan with a timetable, five clear goals and a number of strategies and assessment measures. Elements of the comprehensive plan range from the capabilities we want to inculcate in our students to setting the direction for the way we mentor our newest faculty members and the support we provide for the research of our established faculty.

What we were also looking for from the planning process was a key phrase--a short descriptor of who and what this university is and what drives every decision we make. That descriptor—an academic bumper sticker if you will—is for the benefit of every member of our broad community to embrace and use in talking about our University. Those involved in the process identified three key qualities that define WMU. The resulting statement is a simple one.

*Western Michigan University is learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged.*

Over the past few weeks, we've begun to use that description in many settings. I use it this afternoon to both examine who we are and to lay out three related goals for the coming year. But before I do that, I want to put those three qualities and our strategic planning in a much larger context. This planning and these qualities and goals do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. And they will not. Too much energy has gone into this work. In accomplishing their task, our strategic planners demonstrated a keen awareness of that broader context.
I have been struck over the past two weeks by just how relevant and prescient our University planners have been.

I am a fan of author Thomas Friedman, the Pulitzer Prize winner whose bestselling books include "The World is Flat" and "The Lexus and the Olive Tree." I have had the privilege of introducing him as a speaker, and I consider him something of an oracle--giving voice to and defining the critical issues of our time.

Friedman has just published a new book defining this nation's current challenges. "That Used To Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back" is the book, and it was published two weeks ago. He seems to have struck a chord again. This time, WMU's strategic planning is in curious parallel to the solution Friedman lays out as the way to turn the American story into a happy ending.

The planning that has taken place on campus has been timely and relevant, embracing months ago exactly the qualities Friedman and his coauthor suggest--education, global engagement and discovery. He calls them America's sustainable values. They are certainly our sustainable values.

When asked how we can climb out of the current downward spiral, Friedman recently told one interviewer:

"We get out of it by falling back on the great traditions that actually held us for 235 years: emphasizing education, infrastructure, immigration, the right rules and regulations for risk taking, and government funding research. All of that used to be us and can be again."
Friedman's premise is exactly ours, and that premise is this: You must define and reaffirm your strengths at the exact time they are most needed. Friedman calls on the traditions that made this nation great. They are traditions that were key to accomplishment, but they are also traditions that had been largely ignored in a post-Cold War comfort zone.

This University is in the same position. Those three qualities--being learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged--are not new to us. They are our traditional strengths, and they are exactly the qualities that have brought us to where we are today. From time to time, however, we need to reexamine and reaffirm the basics that have made us great.

To paraphrase Dwight Eisenhower, it's not the plan that's important, it's the planning. The planning process is what has allowed us to identify and reaffirm our strengths. It's that definition and reaffirmation that will propel us forward. Our draft plan has great value, but will be subjected to all manner of external and internal forces. We'll continuously tweak our goals and metrics. But the core qualities we have reidentified and reaffirmed will guide us. That is the gift we've given ourselves by planning. Those qualities give us direction and identity.

**The three pillars**

Let's talk about those three pillars of our identity and the goals and initiatives for the coming year that support them.

**First, we are learner centered.**

As a University community, we embrace lifelong learning for every part of our campus community—those learners now engaged and those we will serve in the
future. We are all learners and we all have the capacity to both teach and assimilate knowledge from others. Our students are our primary focus. We lead them in discovery and learn from and with them. We learn from those around us, and we learn from our work in the lab or in the solitary creative process.

Our learners range from beginning freshmen to senior faculty researchers who make cutting-edge discoveries that increase their own knowledge. Our community of learners expands with each new initiative. Our brand new Lifelong Learning Academy extends our learning resources to serve our community's senior citizens. New partnerships with community colleges ensure future students have immediate access to the WMU learning resources they will use in the future. This year, we began building the new Western Michigan University School of Medicine that will open in fall 2014, adding hundreds of additional learners to our community. The breadth of our learning community is boundless.

We must, however, be vigilant and watchful over the programs and initiatives we offer to learners. Once launched, we must do continuous reviews to ensure those programs remain relevant and at the cutting edge in their disciplines. For that reason, I ask Provost Greene to launch work on one of the goals outlined in our plan. Under the guidance of the Faculty Senate, and commensurate with the new draft strategic plan, I would like to see us develop an appropriate process for an evaluation of our programs that can begin later this academic year. The path forward is laid out in the strategic plan, which calls for us to "develop, revise and/or eliminate programs" based on "review and evidence of demand."

**We are discovery driven**

Discovery is at the core of learning. There is nothing static about our profession, nor should there be. Discovery encompasses all that we do as we apply what we
know now to generate new knowledge. That new knowledge is generated through the application of science in the laboratory, the rigor of research in the library and in the solitary creative process in the studio or office.

Our scholarship creates new knowledge, forms a basis for innovative solutions, leads to economic development, and makes substantial contributions to our society and our own learning community.

Two years ago, I suggested one of the goals of this learning community should be to garner at least $60 million in research expenditures annually by the end of a five-year period. That would double our current annual grant total. The economy and changing federal grant patterns made the past two years a difficult time to achieve that goal, and our grant totals are at a plateau. But developments over the past year should get us moving again. First, we have been able to begin to rebuild our faculty ranks—not as quickly as we'd like certainly, but real progress is being made. This fall, we have welcomed 37 new tenure-track faculty members to our campus—scholars who bring a range of discovery and teaching talents that will allow more work to proceed campuswide.

Our new School of Medicine will spark synergies and lead to research opportunities not currently available to us. Already we are seeing results from that initiative, as our Biosciences Research and Commercialization Center has been moved under the auspices of the new medical school. This summer, the BRCC provided the school of medicine with its very first research award—a $3.8 million investment from the Michigan Strategic Fund.

We are coordinating our research and scholarly activities in the humanities with a new center to focus those efforts. One of today's honorees, Katherine Joslin, is the
spark behind that work, and she's a model for so many others on campus who are working to add new vigor to our discovery support systems.

As I said two years ago, given the current credentials and talent that characterize this University's faculty, $60 million in annual research expenditures by the end of five years is an ambitious but entirely doable goal. You've just heard about the incredible quality of our faculty members this afternoon. And so once again, I am reissuing this goal and resetting the clock for an initiative this campus should embrace.

And, we are globally engaged

Western Michigan University impacts the globe positively. We have built a community of learners committed to human dignity, sustainability, social responsibility and justice. Our campus embraces, with pride, a diverse population of students, faculty and staff who work to develop learners and leaders who are locally oriented and globally competent, culturally aware, and ready to contribute to world knowledge and discovery. That language is directly from our strategic planning document. I use it because it so beautifully explains and frames one of our core values.

I am pleased at our progress this year in bringing more international students to our campus. To enhance our existing global strengths, I suggest a goal of doubling the number of our students who study abroad each year. We currently have more than 500 students in study abroad programs annually. They take part in WMU programs in more than 30 countries. In addition, our University has links to countless other programs under the auspices of organizations around the world. With the wealth of opportunity and the clear need for graduates with global competence, I would like to see the number of WMU students in overseas studies double over the next five
years to 1,000. I would regard that 1,000-student figure as just a beginning, as we work hard to make sure more and more of our students take advantage of the opportunities that will enhance their abilities to connect and work in a global environment.

I have a second goal for us as a campus as we look at cultural awareness. It is triggered by a simple, but embarrassing calendar error that occurred this fall. On Oct. 8, we will hold our annual Homecoming celebration on campus. Because Homecoming revolves around a football game, arriving at a date is a complex process involving the NCAA, the Mid-American Conference, television networks, our athletics department and other offices and units across campus. It is often set, then changed and set again. This year during that process, none of us involved realized--until it was too late--that the final date selected coincides with the Jewish high holy day of Yom Kippur.

When we talk about being "culturally aware" and mindful of the diverse populations we serve, something like this must not happen. We have reinvigorated our measures designed to build the awareness we seek. Preventing such a recurrence is a personal goal of mine and one that I ask every member of our campus community to embrace. When we offend some members of our campus, we offend all of the members of our campus. Our Jewish students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members have my profound apology for this episode.

I feel strongly about this issue—and our commitment to all three of our key institutional qualities. I think we are at our very best when we engage all three of those strengths. I see examples every day of what we can do when we embrace those qualities. Earlier in this convocation we celebrated people who personify those strengths. Here's one more example.
Last week, Newsday and the international publication Global Post became just the latest to note the work of Dr. Alan Poling, our psychology professor, lifelong learner and behavioral research scientist who is having a global impact through his work in Tanzania. He is using the remarkable abilities of a giant pouched rat species to both diagnose tuberculosis and detect the presence of landmines—two goals that will have a profound impact globally.

Alan Poling told an interviewer late last year that he regards the work he's doing as both personally and professionally beneficial. "For me, this has certainly been a life-changing experience and a great opportunity to do humanitarian work," he said. When he's on campus and mentoring student learners, as he is doing this semester, he's sharing what he's learned in Africa as well as the lessons learned throughout his 34-year career at Western Michigan University.

His work is a marvelous example of what this institution stands for and how our strengths can and will be leveraged in the future. Being learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged will set the stage for each of us and our University to reach new heights. Those heights are limited only by our own reticence to reach for them.

I leave you with a quote from Helen Keller.
"One can never consent to creep when one feels the compulsion to soar."

I hope you feel compelled to soar. Thank you again for being here and for all that you do every day to make this outstanding University an institution of distinction—one committed to our students and the larger community we serve. I
look forward to visiting with you in the Richmond Center after this gathering. I understand there's a football game tomorrow. I hope to see you there as well. Go Broncos!