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Service Learning Summit

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Service Learning Summit
John M. Dunn
Feb. 10, 2012

- Good morning, and let me add my welcome to all of you, plus my thanks to you for being here for the first of what we believe will be an annual opportunity to gather and really examine this important topic--Service Learning.
- Southwest Michigan's own Muhammed Ali once said that "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."
- That's a consistent message we share with our students and one, frankly, that our students embrace. Service to community has always been one of this University's hallmarks and one that has been strengthened over recent years. Service learning and all of its potential is really an enhancement of that part of our identity and traditions.
- It is a thoughtful and organized way to take the expressed need of our community--what many of you have told us needs to be accomplished--and integrate work that addresses those needs into our academic core, in a way that allows and encourages students to leverage the skills they are developing in a way that serves the community and gives our students a chance to reflect on and analyze what they've learned.
- And service learning can be as varied as the enormous range of disciplines we teach.
 - Civil engineering students can analyze walking routes around public school neighborhoods to recommend safety enhancements.
 - Communication students work with community agencies to help improve dialogue and build effective communication channels.

-Business students work with community organizations to learn to function as team members and, someday, leaders in their own communities.

- I am always cautioned at events like this to be mindful of the differences between simple volunteerism and service learning. Both are important, and I am a strong advocate for both. But our topic today is service learning. Recently, I came across this wonderful way of contrasting the difference between volunteerism and service learning.

If students collect trash out of an urban streambed, they are providing a valued service to the community as volunteers. If those students collect trash from an urban streambed, analyze their findings to determine the possible sources of pollution, and share the results with residents of the neighborhood, they are engaging in service-learning.

- We've incorporated service learning into our curricula for many years, but two years ago, we decided to move to a new level of community engagement with a center and personnel focused on how best to refine the talents and skills of WMU in service of this community. Our Center for Service Learning was created to serve as an information clearinghouse, a matchmaker between our community partners and the University, and a resource center promoting best practices.

- And we've made service learning an important goal in our University's new strategic plan. When we talk about being Learner Centered, Discovery Driven and Globally Engaged, one of our primary strategies on the "learner centered" front is to: "Enhance community service learning and research opportunities for faculty, staff, and students."

- That infrastructure and goal is really what brings us together this morning. This is a chance to explore even more ways we can work as a community to accomplish goals and build a generation of future leaders for whom community service is second nature. This is a chance for all of us to reflect on what we've learned and imagine more possibilities.

- This is also an opportunity for me to say, "Thank You" to all of you--community partners, faculty, staff and students for your contributions to making this a stronger community and a stronger university through service learning. It is hard work. It takes commitment, real energy and time to re-envision how we work together and how we inculcate the notion of service into our students' lives. It is hard to step outside your comfort zone and plan something new with an uncertain outcome. You have my gratitude.

- Every semester during our commencement exercises, I take a few moments at the end of the ceremony to urge our graduating students to keep service at the forefront of their personal and professional lives. I often share quotes about service to others from people I've spent my life admiring--Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer and George Washington Carver--just to name a few.

With the help of all of you, my commencement remarks will simply be a reminder to young people who already know the joy and benefits of community engagement.

- Let me leave you with a quote from author E.B White who once said:

I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

May all your days be hard to plan for that very reason. Thank you for sharing this day with us and thank you for all you do as advocates for service learning. Thank you.