Michigan Geographic Bee Welcome

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu
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 fifth 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 some 100 of you from 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. Michigan has had four national champions in the 24-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. We're ready for another Michigan champion.

• 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 by having such an opportunity. It left me changed forever. Today, it's my privilege to lead Western Michigan University, which has students from 92 nations this year--and I learn something new from them every day.

Because geography is your passion, because tomorrow is 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 reluctant 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 a geography professor at a New York University. It seems this professor 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 the professor made up that quote, said it was from Einstein and posted it on his office door.
Not one of them picked up the clue embedded in the made-up quote. The clue was an obvious one. 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.