College of Fine Arts 40th Anniversary Dinner

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Good evening. And thank you for inviting me here this evening. It has been my privilege to be here with you this evening to celebrate the success of those who founded this amazing college as well as the success of each successive set of leaders who have stood on the shoulders of those founders.

Dr. Robert Holmes, your visionary founding dean, and the first chairs of the disciplines--Bob Fink in music, Elizabeth Hetherington in dance, Charles Meyer in art and Zack York in theatre--had a vision. All of you who have led since then had made that vision a reality and polished it in a way that I think would have astounded your predecessors.

What you have all built together is a college that really is a jewel in this University setting, and one that enjoys national renown. The college and those who are part of it illustrate a level of quality that I brag about on a regular basis. And yes, I know some on our campus say "bragging" or "boasting" is not an appropriate behavior for a University president. But the College of Fine Arts make it difficult not to do so.

It takes only a quick look at what has happened over the past year to put faces, hearts and souls--on that vision. I'm speaking of our students and their accomplishments. Here are just four examples.

- The outstanding exhibit now at the Richmond Center for students of the Frostic School of Art
- The rave reviews Department of Theatre students won in Scotland last summer.
- The selection of our dance students to perform in May at the Kennedy Center.
The triumph of the School of Music's three trombone students who will compete this summer in Paris at the highest level of the music education world.

- You know there are things that keep a University president awake at night. I've learned I don't have to count sheep. I count the achievements of our students--what we get right and where we make a difference. When I do, I find there's a distinctive artistic bent to many of the achievements that put me at ease.

- Student achievement has become a hallmark of our college. The four disciplines represented by those accomplishments--art, dance, music and theatre are all accredited by each of their national professional accreditation organizations at the highest level--another hallmark.

- Underpinning the work of the leadership, the faculty and students are our donors who make so much possible. Your generosity has allowed us to leverage resources in a way that makes all of what we do here possible. I know your motives reflect your passion for the arts, your commitment to education and your love of community. Our world is a richer and more creative environment because of what you do, and your support is another distinctive hallmark of the College of Fine Arts.

- Bob Luscombe, the college's second dean--and another visionary leader--could not be here this evening. I had a message from him. He wanted to me to note another of the college's truly distinctive hallmarks. This evening, he reminded me, I would be "in the presence of the most dedicated, gifted, hard driving, student-centered, honest, budget crunching, nationally engaged, community focused, slightly underpaid administrative staff and executives on the WMU payroll or in retirement." He's right.
• Finally, I have to note an extraordinary hallmark of this college and a major reason for its success. In its 40 years of existence, the College of Fine Arts has had just three visionary deans leading it--Robert Holmes for the first eight years, Bob Luscombe for the next 20 years and Dean Margaret Merrion for the past 12 years. It is Margaret who has so beautifully articulated the college's vision and mission of "elevating the human condition through the arts" and who reminds us every day of its role as a "College of Distinction." I am thankful every day that leadership of this college is in her capable hands. Thank you, Margaret.

• Thank you all for what has been achieved in the past 40 years and for the achievements that are most certainly to come. You make us all very proud.