Solar Array and Charging Station Celebration Welcome

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Good Afternoon.
Thank you for inviting me to share this special event with you. I am honored to address this gathering and to be among those celebrating the accomplishments and the potential of the three very special young people being honored today--Peter, Ryan and Madalyn.

• Members, your generosity and commitment to a scholarship program that will nurture future leaders of this city may have an impact even greater than the one you envision. I speak from experience. Many years ago, I was the recipient of a similar community scholarship that made it possible for me to attend Northern Illinois University. Without that transformative opportunity, I’m quite sure I would not be standing here today as the president of a great research university.

• I was struck by the similarity of my own scholarship experience and that of Harry D Marshall, your longtime member from whom you took inspiration for this annual scholarship program. His family made extraordinary sacrifices to help him attend Grand Rapids Junior College, and his mother even pawned her engagement ring to make it possible. He went on to attend the University of Michigan only after a local foundation stepped in with the necessary funds.

His story is an example of two critical elements that characterize this community:
- The first is the presence generous donors like you who have committed to making the difference for young people who can became the next generation of community leaders. You have honored Harry Marshall in a perfect way--by allowing the impact of a university education to be extended to young people who will transform their community, just as he did.
- The second critical element of the Marshall story is reflected in the name, history and mission of the University Club itself. For nearly 90 years the members of the University Club of Grand Rapids have celebrated and nurtured the importance in their personal and professional lives of one common shared experience--higher education.

- Your founders were committed to the university experience and common bonds they found at such disparate places as Harvard, Yale, Michigan, Princeton, Amherst and Colgate. Members like Harry Marshall spent lifetimes of civic engagement repaying this community for the opportunities higher education provided them.

- I share that feeling of obligation and the need to pay the favor forward. My own experience left me with a lifelong commitment to ensure that all qualified students have access to our great universities.

We know what the university experience is all about. We know there are tangible and intangible benefits that continue to play out in our lives every day. These three wonderful students are about to experience those benefits as well. They are about to be given free rein to explore a wealth of university resources that will help develop the passions they already discovered and lead them to new personal and professional passions that will set the stage for lifelong achievement.

But the higher education model we all value and the one these students will encounter is under pressure to change in ways that could fundamentally alter that value proposition. One of my missions today is to urge you--people who know full well the worth of the product--to dial up your advocacy for higher education and the value of the total university experience.
• Quite simply, higher education in general and our great universities in particular are being challenged to change the very nature of what they are. Budget constraints, the need to have a technically proficient workforce and the incredible value of a college degree in the workplace lead too many to question the role of a broad liberal arts education--at precisely the time that broad liberal arts education is most needed.

I'm sure you've heard the argument that we're in a back-to-basics world and higher education can be no exception. Colleges and universities, those voices say, should cut tuition, eliminate "unnecessary" classes for students and focus on giving students the basic job skills they'll need for entry-level jobs. Students and their families, those critics say, just want to get a diploma in the shortest and most direct method possible.

Whenever I hear the argument about narrowing the focus of what students study, I have to point out the disconnect between focusing on entry-level job skills and the broader mission of higher education--empowering students for a lifetime of accomplishment. The latter requires a full range of communication, English, math, philosophy, economics, history and language classes. Those are the liberal arts education staples that take our students beyond the basics and into the realm of their real-world needs.

Engineers, accountants, teachers, health care providers, architects, lawyers, doctors and musicians, and host of other professionals benefit throughout their lives from an education that allows them to consider the great ethical issues of our time, the history that brought us to where we are today and the cultural practices that both bind us to and separate us from our global neighbors.

Our focus has to continue to be on producing a well-educated work force, and it has to reflect the reality of what "well-educated" means in a global economy. To do less will
shortchange our students' future options and our state and nation's long-term ability to prosper. To do less denies new generations the benefits we continue to enjoy.

In 2011, the Association of American Colleges and Universities released a survey of 302 private-sector and nonprofit business leaders around our nation—people like you. The survey reflected employers' increased expectations of new employees. It also reflected increased demands that colleges produce graduates ready with specific job skills AND broad communication, research and analytical abilities.

- 91 percent said they expect employees "to take on more responsibilities and to use a broader set of skills than in the past," and employees "are expected to work harder to coordinate with other departments than in the past."
- 89 percent of employers said colleges should place more emphasis on preparing students "to effectively communicate orally and in writing" and to use "critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills."
- 81 percent wanted grads to have "the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through internships or other hands on-experiences."

Employers also said they want employees who are prepared for the global economy—and they want colleges to do a better job of equipping students for that reality.

Employers in that study gave us valuable feedback. They said we should take the critical parts of a broad liberal education—critical thinking and analysis, communication and global competency—and do them even better. The attitudes reflected in that survey remind me of Albert Einstein's famous remark about the importance of college.

"It is not so very important for a person to learn facts. For that he does not really need a college. He can learn them from books," Einstein said. "The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks."
There is not a true crisis afoot--yet. Too many people like you know the value of education and it's ability to impact every part of our lives. But there is cause for vigilance. Not a week goes by without some loss of important resources in the higher education arena or some erosion of support that is reflected in a new study, a bad funding decision or a poorly informed political stance.

-A higher education study late last year, for instance, found that the humanities "have become disfavored in the policy climate of competitiveness because many policy makers regard these disciplines as unlikely to yield novel discoveries or workforce development."

-Just this week, the University of Pittsburgh announced it is cutting budgets and suspending graduate admissions for the departments of religious studies, the classics and German language--three of its humanities strongholds.

Losses like that occur more frequently than I like to acknowledge. And public universities appear to be more at risk. What we call the humanities--the disciplines that process and document the human experience--are at the core of the discussion and are perceived as suffering loss of public support. Think literature, history, anthropology, philosophy--all the college majors that are not also the names of actual modern jobs.

On the campus of Western Michigan University, we have chosen to buck that trend. Rather than curtail programs in the humanities, we have launched a new initiative to nurture and sustain them. Our Center for the Study of Humanities was launched last fall to serve as an incubator for ideas, to keep the humanities at the center of a university experience, to examine the intersection of the humanities and the professions and to continue to the role we've carved out as a state-supported school that maintains a liberal arts education at its core. As we're building our new School of
Medicine curriculum, the link between medicine and the humanities will be a strong one.

When I return to campus this afternoon, I will put the finishing touches on my remarks for this weekend's commencement ceremonies. We'll celebrate the success of more than 2,700 students who will graduate in four ceremonies. They will head home and go on to graduate school, medical school and law school. They'll teach and find jobs with international entities or small firms. They will leave incredibly well prepared to fully use the current state of knowledge in their chosen disciplines--they'll be job ready, certainly. But they also will be ready to put that knowledge in context and to be ready for a lifetime of incredible change and growth in that body of knowledge.

For our student honorees today, I would offer just a few pieces of advice to help you find that same kind of success in your own university studies. It is the advice I give to each of our incoming students and there are three parts to it. The first two are obvious and something I know you will do. The third is the lynchpin.

• First, go to class--always
• Second, find the library--either the actual physical location or its online iteration.
• Third, and most important--be ready to explore and tap all the resources that are laid out before you. Don't miss a single opportunity to try something new, explore a foreign concept or forge a new relationship. You are about to embark on journey that may take you exactly where you plan to go now, or it may take you somewhere you cannot yet imagine.

• When you find the success, I know will be yours, my hope for your future happiness would be that you find a way to use what you've learned in service to your community. From the service you've already demonstrated, I am confident that will be your priority.
I'd like to leave you all with a quote from W. E. B. du Bois, American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, author and editor--clearly a proponent of the humanities.

"[T]he true college will ever have but one goal," he said. "Not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes."

May your lives in the years to come be full of spiritual and physical nourishment, joy, prosperity, personal growth, exploration and success.

Thank you.