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Exercise is Medicine: Achieving Total Campus Buy-In

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Good morning. I'm happy to be here talking on a topic about which I care deeply. I also find myself continuously incredulous that the idea of regular exercise as a means to a better life and yes, higher academic achievement, is still something that always sounds like a fresh idea.

Whether it is a new idea or an old one, I believe strongly that Exercise is Medicine. It is good for you.

As your university president, there are important personal and professional reasons why I care about my own well-being and why I spend time and invest personal and institutional capital to promote exercise or physical activity, not just for myself but for students and employees too. It is important to secure buy-in from our entire campus community--today more than ever.

I'll outline some of those reasons in a moment, but first, let's return to what I just said and ask ourselves what has prevented this concept from finding its rightful place in our nation's conventional wisdom.

Exercise for total well-being is not a new idea. Through antiquity the realization that exercise improves health and mental acuity has been described. In the century before Christ, Roman orator and statesman Cicero once noted "It is exercise alone that supports the spirits, and keeps the mind in vigor."
And less than a century later another Roman author and lawyer, Pliny the Younger, noted:

"It is remarkable how one’s wits are sharpened by physical exercise."

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Here we are 2,000 years later. Contrast those two statements from ancient Romans with one from a modern American hero, Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon. Here's what he said when a news anchor asked him about jogging and his fitness regime.

"I believe that the Good Lord gave us a finite number of heartbeats and I'm damned if I'm going to use up mine running up and down a street."

And, of course, we have all heard the famous—I prefer infamous—quote from Robert M. Hutchins.

"Whenever I feel like exercise, I lie down until the feeling passes."

So you see, it's been an uneven path forward. Interest in exercise and physical fitness goes in waves—and wanes in waves as well. Over the centuries, we have adopted and rejected ideal body types and then adopted new ones again. We establish an expectation of what a fit person must look like, and then fail to realize that every person, regardless of shape or size, can benefit from exercise and a realistic level of fitness.

Our campus is no different. Over the years, we've had a cohort of students interested in and committed to exercise, while other students fail to recognize the connection between physical exercise, stress relief and brain power. Our campus fitness centers have been full and those centers have been a positive recruiting tool.
But if recent studies about childhood obesity and student fitness are any indication, we are facing a wave of young people for whom inactivity--in school and after school--is an ingrained way of life. Add to that inactivity, an increasing level of stress among students, and I predict that the ability to keep students healthy, focused and productive will require that we utilize every physical fitness tool in our toolbox.

**Fitness on campus**

For me as President, this all represents both a challenge and an opportunity. From my perspective--as an educator with an intensive background in physical education--our campus commitment to physical fitness must reflect buy-in from everybody: our faculty, staff and students. It must be a part of our institutional routine and commitment.

Why?

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First and foremost, it is the right thing to do for our students. If the University’s mission is to help our students reach their full potential, we know that their academic performance and success in the future will be enhanced by boosting their fitness level.

Second, it allows us to maximize the investment our students, families and the state make in our University. When our campus community is operating at its full potential, we are ensuring the maximum return on investment for everyone who plays a role in funding and equipping our campus with top-notch people.

And finally, campus-wide physical fitness is a matter of self-interest--both our personal and financial self-interest. There are very real improvements to the
bottom line for campuses that focus on exercise. For Western Michigan University which is self-insured, a physical fitness focus pays dividends by enhancing employee stamina (productivity) and reducing health care costs.

I feel so strongly about building a healthy University, it has become a pillar of my presidency. I take my definition of "healthy" from the World Health Organization, which defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."--

This definition has stood the test of time because of its breadth and balance. Health is about living life to one’s fullest while respecting the nature of each person’s uniqueness. Good health is a quest; a conscious effort each and every day to maintain balance and harmony in our physical, mental and emotional well being--or in the vernacular of the young, to be "in the zone."

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What is a healthy university? Again, I want to use "health" in the broadest sense of the term. Our goal as a university community is good health in all its manifestations:

- Intellectual vigor
- Physical health
- Emotional and spiritual awareness
- Financial health and stability
- A healthy dose of self-esteem and confidence, and
- The ability to think beyond our individual and limited view to a larger perspective of the needs of our greater society--a world view, if you will.
That is what we are building together. We must be good stewards of the health of our university for the present and for generations to come. Much if what we need to accomplish can be done by:

- Preserving our individual, institutional and natural resources;
- Preserving and enhancing our commitment to human capital—allowing the full development of the potential of every member of our community; and
- Committing ourselves to the fundamental principles that already are part of the mission and values we have defined as a university community. We have defined what a healthy organization looks like and we must adhere to those principles to achieve the goal.

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**How to get there**

So how do I make sure our university community—professors, staff and students—buy into this healthy proposition? What can a president do?

- Talk fitness constantly and try to lead by example
- Use every campus asset available to promote fitness.

By assets, I mean every experience, every facility and every student activity and campus tradition. We Broncos are particularly blessed. Western Michigan University has an incredible fitness infrastructure and a welcoming staff willing to be innovative and work with all individuals...regardless of their level of athleticism.

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Our campus is very committed to campus-wide wellness. It is such a priority, in fact, that it included as a guiding principle of our University Strategic Plan. Goal #4 speaks specifically to our commitment to “Ensure a diverse, inclusive and
healthy community.” Physical exercise is a core component to achieving that goal. Not only is it important, it is fun.

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**Physical infrastructure in place at WMU**

Let me share with you the assets that come into play when we focus on fitness at Western Michigan University. Facilities include

- A 600-acre pedestrian campus with no through roads. It's ideal for running.
- A state-of-the-art student recreation center with climbing wall, indoor track, indoor pool and an impressive array of indoor courts and fitness equipment
- An athletic club to which every WMU employee has an automatic membership. Membership in the athletic club or membership in our recreation center is redeemable by employees as a taxable benefit.
- An ice rink and natatorium
- A West Michigan location that is surrounded by outdoor recreational facilities.

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**Programmatic/operational fitness tools**

As I said, I consider our campus fortunate to have the physical facilities to do so much. But new initiatives and even old standbys offer an opportunity to inculcate physical fitness activities into campus life.

- Does what we eat affect our well-being? It most certainly does! Recent dining hall renovations focused on a growing interest in healthy dining choices on campus. The renovated hall is a model for the addition of healthy dining options in other halls.
-Our campus commitment to sustainability is firm, and fitness becomes another feature of that commitment. Through exercise and fitness, we're sustaining our human resources and maximizing the energy and potential contribution of every member of our community.

-Healthy Bronco students are not our only priority. A recent fitness/wellness initiative involves WMU employees too with the implementation of a personalized one-to-one fitness program. Its intent is to help professors, police officers, cooks and custodians take charge of their own physical and mental well being. The goals are to improve employee health, increase productivity and reduce health care costs. Nearly 600 participants completed the first year by improving their waistlines, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, muscle tone and overall health habits. Their successes have encouraged even more employees to join the wellness movement.

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**Campus traditions**

-Our campus traditions--new and old--now have a new fitness element or focus on fitness. These activities are far less costly than new facilities, but tremendously effective in communicating our campus commitment to physical activity.

-Our freshman welcome activities now include Buster's Moonlight Stampede--an evening 3K run led by our campus mascot Buster Bronco.

*(Good place to insert about you telling a freshman that you were a student…)*

-About a decade ago, our annual Homecoming celebration began including a 5K run through campus early on Homecoming day. The Campus
Classic is now an entrenched Bronco tradition that attracts alumni from as far away as California and hundreds of faculty, staff and students. Each year now, more than 1,500 runners enjoy our campus at its peak fall beauty.

-For nearly 20 years, we've turned finals week into a celebration of the fact that physical activity can help relieve stress and refocus the brain. Our Finals Finish turns our Student Recreation Center into one massive study break location staffed by volunteers from across campus. Students snack, swim, do Karaoke, attend fitness classes, take scuba diving lessons and get massages. It has become as much a part of finals week as the exams themselves.

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**More work to do**

In case you have not heard, Western Michigan University is engaged in establishing a new School of Medicine. We are doing so at a time when all the old curriculum models are being replaced with curricula that reflect the needs of medicine in the 21st century. That means we'll have the opportunity to ensure that future physicians have an understanding of the importance of exercise and the critical role it plays in prevention and treatment.

We also are seriously considering the step of becoming a smoke-free campus. More and more campuses around the nation that have enacted such a policy in recent years—University of Michigan did so this fall. Our buildings have been smoke-free for some time now, but we know we can make a bigger impact on health by extending that no-smoke zone to include our entire campus. Doing so would make us more consistent with our stated concerns for student and public health, by removing the harm caused by a Class-A carcinogen and a recognized
toxic air contaminant for which there is no safe level of exposure.

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Good health practices enhance the ability of educated people to reach their potential and make an impact on the world. We don't want them to be in the position of jazz great Eubie Blake. He enjoyed a long life--dying five days after his 100th birthday. Late in life, he famously said:

"If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."

I'd like to see a population of students who leave our campuses expecting to live well and be productive well into their 90s--students who know how to take care of themselves. That's the “Return on Investment” we should be seeking for every new facility, program and initiative we launch. So take Mr. Blake’s advice. Take care of your whole self. Take advantage of our Rec Center, our intramural sports teams, a jog around the Ring Road or a swim in the pool. Ride a bike on campus or on the Kalamazoo River Trail. Whatever you do, keep moving and make your chosen activity a part of your weekly routine. It will enhance your stamina, lift your spirits and clear your mind for learning.

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Thank you for allowing me to share with you the importance of exercise, now, and continually as you move into careers and family life. I'd be happy to answer your questions.