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Dominican Republic Independence Day

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Good afternoon. It is really my honor to be invited to join you this afternoon in this celebration of 170 years of independence for the Dominican Republic. To all of our students from the DR, I must simply wish you the very best, as your nation marks this milestone on Thursday.

As each year passes, and as I have the opportunity to visit the Dominican Republic more often, I am learning more about your history and traditions, so I appreciate this opportunity to be part of your celebration and to reflect on the similarities and differences between our nations. Our nations both began as European colonies--yours was first, having been the point at which Christopher Columbus landed in 1492. We fought wars for independence, established governments based on similar constitutions and proudly celebrate our independence by waving red, white and blue flags.

We revere George Washington as one of our nation's founding father, and I know you honor Juan Pablo Duarte [do ARE tay] as the DR's founding father. Both led their nation's fight for independence.

I want to and will certainly make it a point to continue to learn about your nation's long and fascinating history. Every time I visit the DR, I am overwhelmed by the hospitality and the many offers to sightsee and get to know the country better. As often as possible, I like to take advantage of those opportunities. As this wonderful relationship between the Dominican Republic and Western Michigan University continues to grow and flourish, I want to feel more at home in your nation and I hope many of your educational leaders will visit us and develop that same comfort level.
The WMU/DR Connection

Quite simply, I consider the WMU/Dominican Republic connection a model of higher education cooperation. Since 2008, more than 350 DR students have come to WMU through the Dominican Scholars Program. This year, there are 160 of you. Later this spring, I expect to see many of you march across the stage at Miller Auditorium to receive your diplomas. That's when I know we've succeeded. And that's when I know you will be prepared to take your new skills and knowledge back to your nation and find your path and your own success.

More than 140 DR students have already earned their degrees at WMU. We celebrate every one of those, and I know your nation does as well. Last summer, I was pleased to see a very large advertisement run in La Republica that listed each of the students who had graduated by that point in our relationship.

The WMU/DR connection is a good fit, and it's a connection that grows stronger with each passing year. That connection began six years ago with the arrival at WMU of students like you. Your numbers have grown and your successes have been enormous.

More recently, we've built on that basic relationship. We're part of a number of other initiatives that are making our partnership stronger.

- There's a recent and very strong faculty-to-faculty partnership with the ITSC (Instituto Communitario De Educacion Superior.) Last June, three faculty members from WMU traveled with me to the DR and offered a weeklong workshop. Four of our colleagues from ITSC then visited our campus in July
to meet with academic departments and learn how we handle such areas as career and student services.

- We're also exploring and may be very close to an initiative that will increase graduate education opportunities to be offered in the DR. It's a two-way interaction that would maximize the use of higher ed resources here and in the DR by blending in-person and internet instruction to meet student needs.

- And late last fall, Athletic Director Kathy Beauregard and I took on an advising role, by invitation of your nation's Minister of Sport. We were asked to share some insights into intercollegiate sports programs and how they can advance student welfare and help build a sports infrastructure to develop athletes for international competition.

Those three initiatives that are currently underway may just be the tip of the iceberg. I suspect that there will be so much more we do together. Each and every time I visit your country and every time your national leaders visit here, we discover additional items of shared interest and potential.

I predict that this university and the higher education community in the DR will continue to develop new initiatives. It is likely that many of you will someday take part in some of those efforts.

In the meantime, I wish you success and happiness on this campus and in the Dominican Republic when you return there. I am very glad you asked me to be here today. And I'm very happy to wish you and your countrymen Happy Independence Day.
In spite of some chilly weather outside, let me remind you that, "It’s a great day to be a Bronco!"

Thank you.