Michigan Geographic Bee

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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 seventh 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.

- Just to get you started, I have two easy warm-up questions to pose to today's contestants. Raise your hand if you can tell me how many national parks exist in Michigan and how many national forests exist in the state of Illinois. (Follow-up question. What are the names of the Michigan National Park--Isle Royale-- and the Illinois national forest--Shawnee.)

- That's it. You're ready for today and a chance to win that trip to the Galapagos Islands.

- There are 101 of you from cities across Michigan. You come from public schools, private schools and home schools--from:
  - as far north and west as Houghton,
  - as far east as Marysville, and
  - as far south as Monroe. 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 first 25 years of the national bee. Michigan's last national champion won the title in 2002. In 2009 and in 2013, we came close when the Michigan winners became national finalists--These were students just like you who won the state competition right here. And last year's winner who became a national finalist is here again this year, hoping for a repeat--but today's competition is anyone's to win. We're ready for another Michigan national champion. It can happen.

• 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 our world's nations, cultures, economies and people, I guarantee that 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. I grew up in southern Illinois--Pinckneyville--near the Shawnee National Forest. When I had a chance to attend college, it left me changed forever. Today, it's my privilege to lead Western Michigan University, which has students from 105 nations this year--and I learn something new from them every day.
Because geography is your passion and because you may be asked why that is, I'd like to share a quote with you.

President Obama addressed the competitors at the 2012 National Geographic Bee and said this:

"The study of geography is about more than just memorizing places on a map. It's about understanding the complexity of our world, appreciating the diversity of cultures that exists across continents. And in the end, it's about using all that knowledge to help bridge divides and bring people together."

• I can't think of a better reason to excel in this wonderful discipline. Good luck today. Have a wonderful competition. We're counting on you to represent our state well in Washington.

Thank you.