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Presidential Scholars Convocation

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Opening
Thank you, Abby, for those wonderful comments. As usual, my most difficult speaking engagements come when I have to follow one of our incredibly talented students. This evening, apparently, is no exception. And, Faculty Senate President Simpson, thank you for lending your distinguished and eerily familiar face to the proceedings. We will make quite the pair of bookends for the photos taken at the end of this event.

Good evening. This salute to our very best seniors in every discipline is something I look forward to every year. Each year, as I read the short bios in the program, I am moved and honored that you chose this great University to prepare for your life's journey. This is the 35th such celebration and I guarantee the presidents who preceded me at earlier events looked with the same kind of pride at the accomplishments of the Presidential Scholars who came before you. You have earned your department's respect and recognition, and you have been selected for the highest award a Western Michigan University undergraduate can receive. Congratulations. (Pause for applause.)

I would be remiss, and scholars you would be as well, if we did not take a moment to offer our thanks and congratulations to two important groups. First, of course are your families who laid the groundwork for your success and supported you throughout the years of hard work that brought you to this point. Please join me in a round of applause for them. (Lead applause.)

The second group is comprised of your faculty mentors who have been important catalysts to your success here, and who, I know, will be watching your postgraduate
progress with keen interest and great pride. Let's add a heartfelt "thank you" to them for a job incredibly well done. (Lead applause.)

The product of passion
Presidential Scholars, there are 47 of you being honored this evening representing departments across this great University and showcasing what happens when a student truly commits to a discipline and makes the most of every opportunity our faculty and the programs they offer can provide.

As I scanned this evening's program and read about your accomplishments, the passion each of you has for the direction you have chosen jumped off every page. You succeeded because you brought that passion and energy to your field of study. The faculty and staff of 47 disciplines ranging from accountancy and anthropology to theatre and world languages are celebrating your success. They are the University family who maintain the “academic home” to students--you--who will literally change the world.

I'd like each person here this evening to think back on tonight's honorees the next time someone insists that our colleges and universities should be judged only by how many science, technology, engineering and math graduates are produced. We do that well, of course, but we do so much more.

And think about this evening the next time you hear someone propose that higher education should back away from the arts, humanities and social sciences and dissuade students from studying philosophy, history or art. Such voices suggest we try to redirect those with a passion for such disciplines to a career with a more immediate post-graduate return on the dollar.
Such short-term thinking will not be applied here. Instead, this evening we have the opportunity to honor a sixth-generation Marine and decorated veteran of the Iraq war who is studying American history and Latin, who has focused on the history of war and who does the fighting, and who has a goal of attending graduate school and working someday in the justice system.

Because we don't look at higher education as short-term ROI, we're honoring another Presidential Scholar headed for a career in astrophysics who was able to expand his understanding of the links between art and science that date back to Renaissance Europe and helped the great minds of history use those disciplines together to question all they thought they knew.

**The freedom to explore and change**

Those are just two examples of students passionate about what they are doing and determined to take advantage of all that a university education can offer. It's about educating the whole person. To do that requires some freedom to roam and explore—not lose sight of the goal, but to be sure all the right questions are asked and answered.

Last fall, LZ Granderson was on campus. He's a 1996 alumnus who is a senior writer for ESPN and who you'll see most evenings and weekends as a pundit on CNN and NBC. While he was on campus, he took some time to record a testimonial on the impact his alma mater had on his career.

"I was just able to wander--not be lost, but wander and explore." LZ said. "What I did in college, is what, I'm happy to say, I'm doing in my adult life."

LZ figured it out. All of you have clearly figured it out. You have done what New York Times columnist Frank Bruni calls "tilling the four-year college experience for all it's worth." You brought your passion to your discipline at this University. You
changed yourself and you are changing the discipline you love. No one tried to
dissuade you from following the path you set and finding success. And no one should
ever do that for those who come after you.

As I said earlier, you will change the world. I know that because you have already
transformed yourselves. You've changed. You're older, wiser, more accomplished,
ready to take on a career or begin graduate school. You've grown in ways you might
never have imagined before arriving here.

Frank Bruni, the columnist I just mentioned, has a new book out that details what's
right and wrong with how students select colleges--how they find the place that fits,
the place were they can thrive and explore. The ability to explore and change your
mind is part of that fit.

"For every person whose contentment comes from faithfully executing a predetermined
script," Bruni notes, "there are at least 10 if not 100 who...rearrange the pages and play
a part they hadn’t expected to, in a theater they hadn’t envisioned."

**Western Michigan University has changed with you**

I hope that kind of change was part of your undergraduate years. And while you were
changing, I hope you took a moment now and then to reflect on how your University
was changing as well. Western Michigan University has an unwavering commitment to
change--not change for its own sake, but change to always enhance its profile, its
reputation and the quality of all it offers to its students and the global community. We
want more and more people to know about our university and with each increase in
recognition comes a corresponding increase in they way your degree is valued in the
wider community. That change should and will continue as we strive to make sure our
physical facilities are always top notch, our program offerings are carefully considered
and examined, and we're always willing to consider new initiatives that serve our students and our communities.

In the four or so years since you arrived:

- You watched old Sangren Hall come down and a spectacular new Sangren Hall rise at the center of campus.
- You've seen the clouds of tobacco smoke outside most campus buildings come to an end as status as a Tobacco-Free Campus took hold.
- You've seen the once deserted East Campus take on new life as the University made the commitment to preserve and renovate its birthplace, historic East Hall, and turn it into a new alumni center.
- You began your studies with the gift of a WeSustain stainless mug to symbolize our concern for the environment and healthy living. And over the ensuing years you saw a dramatic change in stature as a long-time commitment to sustainability garnered national attention with a series of high-profile accolades.
- During your undergrad years, you've seen your university go from a comprehensive research university to one of only 90 schools in the nation with both a medical school and a law school under its umbrella. When you arrived, we had not even begun discussions about the affiliation that created the WMU Thomas M. Cooley Law School, and we had just announced a wonderful $100 million--then anonymous--gift that led to the creation of the WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine.

Why does that kind of change matter? How does it help the reputation of your university? Let me tell you about the White Coat Ceremony that last fall marked the opening of the WMU Stryker Medical Schools.
Our first class of medical students arrived from all over the nation. There were 54 students from 14 states. They received their symbolic white coats on that day and their families were there to help them celebrate. Many were people for whom the name Kalamazoo was just part of a swing era song. They left this city impressed with the community, impressed with the university and just blown away by the new medical school and its facilities. Their enthusiasm and favorable impressions have since been part of conversations around the country.

**Closing**

You've grown and changed and your University has changed with you. When you leave here, you will start a new chapter focused on growth and building the kind of social and professional capital you've built here. Please remember along the way to keep exploring and give yourselves permission to change and take advantage of new opportunities.

There's a Mark Twain quote I ask you to consider carefully:

"Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Safe travels. Thank you.