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Michigan Association of College Admission Counseling 2015 Annual Conference

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Good morning. I know this is the second day of your conference and that some of you arrived and visited Western Michigan University Wednesday evening, but I still want to extend to each of you a warm and official welcome to Kalamazoo. We're glad you chose our city for you 2015 conference.

When I speak to large groups like this, I always like to set the stage by making sure you know about the University I lead. For the many of you who know WMU well, I ask your indulgence for a moment. For those of you not as familiar as you might be, here's the Cliff Notes version--WMU in 100 words or less.

WMU is a Carnegie-designated research university with 24,000 students from 100 nations and nearly every state in the U.S. More than 20 percent of our students are at the graduate level, and our students find success at high rates in more than 250 degree programs in seven degree granting colleges. The newest additions to the Western Michigan family are two private professional schools, the WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine (just blocks away) and the WMU Thomas M. Cooley Law School, with campuses across Michigan and in Florida.

I find it hard to resist sharing information like that with a roomful of people who counsel high school students. I'm delighted to have an opportunity to speak with you today.

We are partners in many ways and our missions dovetail beautifully. All of us in this room today are pursuing the same goals. We want to make the transition from
high school to college easy, efficient, effective and empowering. We all want students to find the right fit in a post-secondary environment. We want them to succeed. As educators, how could we want anything less for our students.

But we're also citizens of Michigan and because of that we'd like to see our students succeed right here in their home state. We want all their talent, skills, passion and innovative ideas to be put to work to make our state all that it can be. We want their success and ours to be "Made in Michigan."

We want all of that at a time of enormous challenge for education. Regardless of the level, our schools are short-staffed and we all spend too much time trying to figure out how to meet that dreaded mandate of "doing more with less." Just two days ago, your national organization released a report noting that high school counseling departments are able to spend only about 20 percent of their time on the work of college readiness and the college application process. The report said only 40 percent of schools have a counselor whose main responsibility is college counseling.

Colleges and universities are feeling the same stresses and for the same reasons. It's been a tough few years, but there's a central thought that drives us all to rise above the difficulties. For each of our students, this is their time--their time to explore, prepare and succeed. Their futures cannot and will not wait until budgets are better. We have and we will continue to focus every bit of our attention on making sure they have what they need to succeed.

So how do we do that? How do we help them make the right choices? How do we help them realize the value of college in a world that seems hell-bent on
undermining that message? How do we help them choose a direction or major that will help them achieve their full potential? And how do we keep them in the state that raised them? Those big questions are the ones I want to address this morning.

**The value of a college education**

Not a week goes by without hearing some high-profile question about the value of college. Apple developer Steve Wozniak is celebrated in Cadillac's current Dare Greatly commercials—"how dare a college dropout invent the personal computer." A recent national survey of 2000 adults—900 of them with degrees—indicated more than half saw today's graduates getting a lower return on investment than previous generations. And how many times have you heard the mantra that only 50 percent of college grads find jobs?

Here are some basics for you to keep in your arsenal of reasons students should go to college:

• Steve Wozniak knew how important a degree is and went back to school to earn his—even though he was financially secure for life. (That's in case any of our students are watching that Cadillac commercial, and I'm not sure they are.)

• According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for college graduates is less than half of the average national rate. That was the case as well during the very worst days of the recession. In January, the overall unemployment rate was 5.7 percent but just 2.8 percent for college graduates.

• Those with a degree will have lifetime earnings of nearly twice that of those with only a high school diploma—and that gap is growing,
You and I know that a college education leads to much more than financial return, but that's a message that may be best delivered to young people once they have been persuaded to make the commitment. The financial return on investment is a strong argument to gain the initial interest of students and parents. We should be shameless in using the figures such as those I just shared.

In the nine years I've been in my role as president of WMU, the qualities that potential students want most from college have changed. This is not proprietary information by any means. We know from our research--and other schools know the same--that the most important reasons potential students pick one college over another is their perception that a degree from the selected college will lead to a well-paying job. Nine years ago, students were focused on a wide variety of majors, location internships and the total campus experience. Post-recession, students are all about jobs. The second top reason is the availability of the desired major.

"Do you offer the major I'm interested in, and will I get a good job after earning a degree?" are the key questions today for students and their parents. At Western Michigan University, we've made it a priority to be able to answer those questions with information about postgraduate job placement and salaries. I think that may well be the next wave of recruitment information you see nationwide.

Why not? Students should be able to pose those questions at any college or university. At WMU, we now can offer postgraduate success information for every single major, and we base that information on survey responses from more than two-thirds of the 5,200 people who graduated last year.
We can tell students that within three months of graduation, 89 percent of our graduates overall are "actively engaged" in the next step of their career path. Actively engaged is defined as having a full-time job, being in grad school, serving in the military or working part time. We know the median salary for those employed full time is in the $45,000 to $50,000 range. That same information is broken down by major, so a potential student can compare the postgraduate engagement and salary range for English vs. chemical engineering vs. accountancy vs. jazz studies.

**What majors should we emphasize?**

I can almost hear the questions forming in your minds, now. If students and their parents are all about high-paying jobs, won't placement and salary comparisons divert them from majors that they might be well advised to pursue? What is our responsibility when it comes to steering young people toward a career path that suits them.

Yes, there are significant differences in engagement and salary rates by major. But there are surprises as well. We see high engagement rates and salary levels for the STEM and health care disciplines, certainly. But we also see high engagement rates for disciplines such as philosophy, political science and communication. We need to share that as well. We also need to convey the message that areas of study do not exist in silos. They are integrated across the academic infrastructure of a good college or university. They blend well with other disciplines.

There are some today who insist we set aside general education requirements and judge universities only by how many science, technology, engineering and math
graduates are produced. And some propose that higher education should back away from the arts, humanities and social sciences and dissuade students from pursuing degrees in those areas. Such voices suggest we try to redirect those with a passion for such disciplines to a career with a more immediate postgraduate return on the dollar.

That short-term ROI thinking has to be counteracted. Just last week, I attended a ceremony on our campus to honor the top members of our senior class. Forty-seven students were named Presidential Scholars--one from each department and some perhaps from your school districts. They included a physics major headed for a career as an astrophysicist. His education had been dramatically enhanced by the opportunity to study the links between art and science that date back to Renaissance Europe. Another student, a history and Latin double major, is headed for a career in the justice system after focusing his undergraduate research on the history of war and who does the fighting.

Nearly every one of our top scholars reaped that kind of reward from the breadth of disciplines available to them. They have been successful in college and they will be successful in their careers because they had the freedom to explore. They found disciplines that sparked their passions and they combined disciplines in creative ways. Their passion will serve us all, as they become members of our broader communities in the years ahead. We all would have suffered if someone had been able to dissuade them from studying Latin, Renaissance history, religion, sociology or any of a dozen other broad-based disciplines.

**How do we keep young people in Michigan?**
We get students into college. We help them find their passions and prepare for their futures. Now how do we get them to use their talents in Michigan?

One of the best ways to do that is to get them engaged in their industries during their college years. That can be accomplished through practical clinical training, internships or employment. A few moments ago, I talked about the information we have gathered about post-graduate success. There was another critical piece of information that came from our research. That is that the role of those experiential opportunities in a student's future career path is enormous. We found that 68 percent of our graduates had some type of experiential opportunity during their years with us. For interns, a full 20 percent were eventually hired by the organizations in which they interned. Another 35 percent of our grads were hired by companies they worked for before graduation. In all, 74 percent of our grads stayed in Michigan to begin their careers. That bodes well for where they'll settle in the future.

Closing

So, our three-part recipe for Made in Michigan student success is:

1) Get them to commit to college using all the tools at our disposal.
2) Allow them some space in college to wander and explore in a way that lets them find their passion and understand the value of multiple disciplines.
3) Make sure they connect with their industries as students so they have a head start on post-graduate success.

After that, it's up to the young people we raised and educated with such care. I'm confident that Michigan youth are up to the challenge.
Now, I want to be respectful of your time constraints and allow just a moment or two for any questions you might have. Thank you for inviting me here today and please enjoy your time in our city.