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John M. Dunn

Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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Excellence in Education Remarks
John M. Dunn
April 22, 2015

Opening

Good evening. Thank you for that kind introduction.

This is not the first time I have had the privilege of speaking at the annual Excellence in Education event. Because I'm so familiar with the event, my invitation to be here this evening was truly a pleasure to receive. What university president wouldn't welcome the opportunity to meet with students of your caliber, their proud families and their teacher and mentors? You are examples of what our school systems do very, very well.

For the families here this evening and on behalf of our community, I want to say thank you. You have done an outstanding job of preparing these young people for the next part of their journey to success. You must be very proud.

To the teachers who were invited by this evening's honorees, you have our admiration for providing the perfect balance of inspiration, guidance and trust that allowed these students to not just succeed, but excel. Students, please join me in offering a round of applause to the people--your families and teachers--who set the stage for your success.

Students, you inspire us with your achievements and cause us all to recommit our schools and campuses to find new ways to serve students like you who represent the next generation of our state's leaders. As you move forward with your academic careers, I'm confident your college of choice will work extraordinarily hard to add value to your academic experience and move you toward the next step in your life path. I hope to see some of you on the campus of Western Michigan University this fall.

I know that as you complete your studies in high school you take some lessons with you that were learned outside the classroom. Your schools worked hard throughout the past four years to teach by example some important life and leadership lessons. There is a certain set of intellectual qualities schools at every level want their graduates to carry with them into the future.

Diversity--in its totality

First, I'd like to suggest that outside the classroom, the most important lesson I hope you've learned is the value of diversity. That's a word that's become almost a caricature of the incredibly important value it describes. When we talk about diversity on my campus, we talk about it in its broadest meaning.

I hope you've learned to respect and embrace the differences that each of us brings to our interactions with others. I hope you've heard and internalized the idea of civility in addressing some of the most contentious differences of opinion. I hope you move on to your next school with the belief that differences are not just something you tolerate. Differences are something to be embraced and celebrated as a critical aspect of our society's strength.

Differences of race, religion, gender and ethnicity are just the beginning. Those are the easy ones to recognize. As educators, we all work every day to make sure we're paying attention to those.

Differences of beliefs and world views can be more contentious. On my campus, it can be as easy as a walk past the display zone at the center of campus to remind us that not everyone shares our background or expounds views we endorse. But even the most egregious political or religious differences expressed there are a reflection of our strength and commitment to freedom of speech.

Our strength comes from considering and sometimes embracing the value of the differences we all bring to the table--differing viewpoints, geographic backgrounds, political philosophies, learning styles and even temperament. The more we embrace the differences in others, the more we give ourselves permission to be ourselves and not try to fit into someone else's idea of what constitutes the ideal.

The Extravert Ideal

Here's an example. For many years, we have celebrated learning and workstyles that revolve around teamwork and continual communication in an open group setting. We have come to value what best-selling author **Susan Cain** calls "the extrovert ideal." Her book --"Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking"--describes how our schools and our business models are built around the extrovert ideal. Think about cubicles, open office environments, team meetings and group brainstorming. Being an extrovert is mandatory, and parents often worry when their children are not outgoing or extraverted enough to fit that ideal.

A funny thing has happened recently, though. Research from universities around the nation has documented what most of us already knew. We're not all extraverts. In fact, some of our most productive people and historical heroes are or were introverts--Albert Einstein, Mother Theresa, Rosa Parks, Dr. Seuss Theodore Geisel [GUY-sell], Chopin, Steve Wozniak, Bill Gates Steven Spielberg and J.K. Rowling.

- In fact, if the research is correct, more than a third of the people in the room this evening are introverts--people who work better in quiet and solitary environments and who prefer an evening with a good book to a night out with friends. And there's evidence that such preferences are not learned personality traits but rather something hardwired into our brains.

Researchers have also discovered that building our infrastructure and systems around that extravert ideal is not only not beneficial, it is also counterproductive for introverts who valiantly try to remold themselves to match the extravert ideal.

It is counterproductive as well, because discussions are too often carried by the loudest, not the brightest people in a group. That's something many of us have already figured out long ago from watching cable news shows.

There's also a belief that a quiet revolution is coming as those people who revel in solitude come into their own. The next activist group may well rally around the cry, "Introverts of the world unite." This may not be as far afield as you might think. Not too long ago, a local newspaper viewpoint was written by a militant introvert who sagely noted that " $E=MC^2$ was not the work product of a party animal."

Diversity of ideas

There's another element of diversity you need to consider--the diversity of ideas and disciplines. We live in a time when higher education is recognized for the value it brings to an individual, but that value is not well understood.

As you move forward, some of you, particularly in the technical disciplines will choose a major and focus much of your time acquiring a skill set. There will be voices--strong voices--trying to discourage you from taking courses in the liberal arts or what we have long called "general education."

But you will be successful in college and successful in your careers only if you allow yourselves the freedom to explore disciplines outside your intended profession. You will find ideas that spark your passions and help you combine disciplines in creative ways. Your passion will serve us all, as you become members of our broader communities in the years ahead.

Last month, I attended a ceremony very much like this one, but it was for WMU's top-most graduating seniors--one from each department. They included a young man headed for a career as an astrophysicist. His physics education had been dramatically enhanced by his opportunity to study the links between art and science that date back to Renaissance Europe. He discovered the real value of a college education--the ability to open his thinking to new paths. When you begin to draw parallels between what might seem like disparate hemispheres, it is possible—no, it is probable—that greater outcomes will be the result. So, if your heart is set on being an engineer or an accountant, I urge you to also study art history, philosophy or a foreign language. That kind of diversity in your knowledge base will stretch both your mind and your character. You will not only end up a top-notch engineer or accountant, you will stand out in your chosen field as someone who “gets it”, someone who understands the big picture and finds new solutions to old dilemmas.

Three more values to carry forward

I offer that information to the diverse population in this room as something to consider. I also remind the students we're celebrating this evening to embrace and nurture the qualities that brought you here this evening. Move forward in your lives and careers by holding steadfast to those values.

- Keep learning,
 - Keep asking the questions that lead to discovery, and
 - Always be ready to engage with and help others in your workplaces, in your communities and in your world. Share what you know but also listen carefully for the wisdom of others.
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- I suspect that you will all be lifelong learners. It's part of your DNA. I like to think of myself as a lifelong learner and I know I am one every Sunday night when I attack my "homework" for the coming week.

- Remain open to discovery--both professionally and personally. You are well prepared to lead and make discoveries in your career. But don't forget to set aside time and space for personal discovery and reflection.
- And finally, the world is really yours. Your interaction with the rest of the world will only become easier and less complicated as the years unfold. Trust me. Over the span of my career, there's been a quantum leap forward. As a youngster growing up in southern Illinois, to me the world seemed like an enormous place. The term "study abroad" meant heading across the Mississippi River. Today's college students travel around the world at the drop of a hat and find multiple ways of building an international resume. You'll find it easier than you imagine.

Closing

Congratulations. We are all enormously proud of you. I know your families and teachers will be watching your progress for years to come. Your achievements will enhance the reputation of your high school, your community and the university that you will soon call home. If you have not done it already, come visit us at Western Michigan University. Take a moment to stop and enjoy your success this evening, but please know that this is just the beginning of great things to come.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of your evening.