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Faculty Retirement Dinner Remarks

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• Good evening. I am honored to be here with you to celebrate your retirement from Western Michigan University. You are retiring--less than a day after David Letterman. I'm seeing a generational sea change marked here.

• I often like to note that it was this annual event that gave me some of my first great insights into the quality and dedication of the WMU faculty. Having just been named president in the spring of 2007, I had the opportunity to attend the 2007 dinner with then-president Diether Haenicke. It was the most profound affirmation of the power of this university that I could have hoped to experience and I am reminded of that again this evening as I talk with you and read the materials that celebrate your accomplishments.

• There are 18 of you being honored this evening, and you represent six of our seven degree-granting colleges as well as University Libraries. You have been the heart of this University, and when you leave us, you collectively take with you more than 425 years of service and institutional memory. This year's faculty retirees have an average of 24 years of service, but the range of individual years of service is as high 50-plus years. (Laurel Grotzinger)

• The first thing I want to do is to simply thank you for your commitment and contributions. I also want to thank those who have been part of your life here--your loved ones who have supported you in so many ways and helped you be productive. I know many are here with you tonight, and I know this milestone is theirs as much...
as yours. Let's take a moment to acknowledge their role in making tonight's celebration possible. (lead applause)

• In that average 24 years of service, you have witnessed countless physical changes--spectacular new homes for our colleges of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Haworth College of Business, and Health and Human Services. You've also seen the completion of an arts village for our College of Fine Arts and the beautiful new Richmond Center for Visual Arts. You've also seen other dramatic shifts--in student attitudes and expectations, in technology and its role in instruction, and in the demands on higher education to bring economic vitality to our region, state and nation.

• And more recently, you've seen our University become one of fewer than 90 colleges and universities in the nation that is home to both a medical school and a law school.

• Even more important, you've seen this University grow from a regional institution to the national research university it is today. No, let me correct that. You didn't just see that evolution. Your work--your teaching, your research and your creative ideas--fueled that growth and made this University the renowned institution it is today.

• W.H. Auden once said, "A professor is one who talks in someone else's sleep." I've always liked that description. As we honor you tonight, I want you to think about those "someone else's" all around the world. They're former students for whom your voice is a permanent part of their dreams and the sense of direction they summon to meet the challenges they encounter. They are your legacy.
• When I think about retirement and the fact that faculty retirements take great teachers from our midst, I am reminded and always like to share the words of Louis Armstrong when he talked about the possibility of retiring.

"Musicians don't retire," he said. "They stop when there's no more music in them."

• I think the same is true for those who have spent their lives in the classroom. Teachers don't retire. They stop when there's no more love of education in them. As I look at all of you and all you've accomplished, and as I listen to your stories of life as faculty members at this university, I know none of you will truly retire.

• You'll just change your focus a bit. You're not retiring "from" something, as some people do. More likely, you're retiring "to" a life of new discovery and intellectual inquiry. Those ideas and dreams that have been dancing in the background can now take center stage.

• I know some of you are making plans to move from this city, but I want you all to know that no matter where you are--here in Kalamazoo or on the other side of the globe--you will remain part of this university community. You are responsible in large measure for the rich academic life we've developed as a community. We want you to remain part of our community.

• I look forward to seeing you on campus enjoying yourselves in the coming months and years. You've earned it.