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State of the University 2015 Academic Convocation

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Good afternoon honorees, guests, community members, students, faculty and staff members. I'm very pleased you're here with us today to celebrate the accomplishments of our colleagues who exemplify the mission, vision, values, past accomplishments and potential of Western Michigan University.

My role this afternoon is to tell you about the state of our University. You've just heard a litany of accomplishments and examples of commitment that should leave little doubt as to what my assessment will be.

What you didn't hear or read about our award recipients is as important as the accomplishments for which they are being honored. The two recipients of awards for teaching, for instance, are accomplished in the arenas of public performance and public history. Our Make-a-Difference winners are making a difference not just on campus, but in their larger communities. Our Distinguished Service honorees have served their communities and disciplines in ways not even touched upon today. And as we describe the accomplishments of our honored faculty scholars, we've just scratched the surface of their impact as they help create a better and more enlightened world.

I'd like us all to join in one more accolade for the 10 people we've honored today, for those we have honored in the past and for those who aspire to excel and act in a way that will see them receive one of these campuswide awards in the future. How about a nice round of applause?

That depth and breadth of accomplishment we celebrate plays heavily into my assessment of our University's stature and our path to the future. That depth and breadth of accomplishment by the individuals honored today is mirrored by our University as a whole. We may note an individual accomplishment or a
campuswide accolade here and there, but we definitely don't spend the appropriate amount of energy focusing on and sharing the depth and breadth of our programming and the impact we have. That's my job today.

State of the University

The state of Western Michigan University is strong, intensely focused and completely immersed in using its unique resources to propel the state and nation forward. Our University is learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged--and we are focused on the outcomes that those qualities allow us to achieve. We make things happen.

Last year at this event, I said, "we are positioned for a future that few universities will have the opportunity to realize." What has happened--the outcomes--over the past 12 months only reinforces that belief. What we now know we can accomplish together bodes well for the future. Intense strategic planning efforts and thoughtful examination of who and what we are have given us a fresh look at what is possible. Such examination points us in the direction of future refinements to our work.

Discovery accomplishments

The accomplishments of the past year are too many to even list in this setting. Rather than cite dozens, I'd like to give just a few examples of initiatives that reflect longtime strengths, new collaborations and thoughtful and thorough review of our campuswide identity and history. Some have their roots in initiatives noted here last year. All are outcomes--successes--with the potential and likelihood for even greater achievement. And all fit squarely into our identity as a learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged university.

- Autism research and service
Three weeks ago, Michigan Lt. Gov. Brian Calley was on campus to help us open Western's Evaluation Center for Autism and Neurological Disorders---WECAN. The center is part of our Autism Center of Excellence that was funded earlier this year with a special $4 million grant from the Michigan Legislature. The grant is helping us leverage a decades-long international reputation for training and service in the area of autism spectrum disorder. Autism experts Stephanie Peterson and Wayne Fuqua of our psychology department are guiding the efforts. Funded activities are designed to put WMU at the core of work to increase the capacity of our state to serve young people with autism.

It's not every day you hear the kind of comments made that day by the Lt. Governor, so let me share just one.

"Western Michigan University is the best in this field, anywhere in the nation and probably anywhere in the world," said Calley. "It totally changes the direction of people's lives..."

• Securing justice

This University does change lives--and we're about to change more. Earlier this week, we announced a new $418,000 Department of Justice grant to Western Michigan University and the WMU Cooley Law School Innocence Project. That initiative is a legal clinic that seeks to exonerate individuals who have been wrongfully convicted of serious crimes. The effort is emblematic of the synergy that has developed over the past year between the University and the law school. The innocence effort that already has freed three exonerees has emerged as an important intern site for our criminal justice majors. The new funding will support a class at WMU and provide funding to the Innocence Project to boost its capacity and provide DNA testing. Ashlyn Kuersten of gender and women's studies and Mark Hurwitz of political science are the WMU grant principals who will be working in tandem with a colleague at Cooley.
• Creating new products

In late August, the Department of Defense announced a new $171 million manufacturing innovation initiative that revolves around Flexible Hybrid Electronics and the kind of consumer and military applications that will use that technology. Our University, with the guidance of the interdisciplinary engineering team of Massood Atashbar and Margaret Joyce, will serve as a regional hub for that work, positioning our region to play a critical role in what is expected to be a better-than $77 billion industry within 10 years. While this may strike many in our community as "new" technology, I must point out that WMU's involvement in this remarkable initiative is the product of years of development and work that combines and leverages a decades-old WMU strength in printing science with the electrical sensor technology.

• Saving infant lives

Some of our most exciting "discovery" achievements are student directed. For the past six months, we've been tracking the accomplishments and honors of two students who have taken the student entrepreneur world by storm. Undergraduate biomedical and bioengineering majors Joseph Barnett and Stephen John designed a simple and inexpensive neonatal respirator, called NeoVent, that can save young lives in developing nations. Since April, the pair has:

• captured the Lemelson-MIT National Collegiate Student Prize,
• been honored by our Haworth College of Business with the Brian Patrick Thomas Entrepreneurial Spirit Award,
• been named an international finalist in the 2015 James Dyson Award competition, and
• been named the winner of 2015 BMEStart competition sponsored by the Biomedical Engineering Society of America.
They're not done. They've just been notified of yet another national prize competition for which they are finalists. It's embargoed, so I can't tell you any more, but it is significant.

**Looking inward**

Not all "discovery" accomplishments involve grant funding, research or creative activity. Some of the most difficult but ultimately most important accomplishments for a university community revolve around introspection and the ability to bring analytic skills to the task of evaluating ourselves and the programs we offer. It can be uncomfortable but it is necessary and ultimately it strengthens our disciplines and our university. We've just completed two such examinations:

- Academic Program Review, and
- Completion of the first three-year segment of our campuswide strategic planning initiative.

With the help of many members of the university community, we've looked carefully at our strengths, moved to mitigate weaknesses, set new goals and developed new strategies to achieve them. Both efforts strengthen us as a university and show our strength and self-confidence. And both efforts lead naturally to continued thoughtful analysis. Planning and review are regular features of academic life. We've shown that it can be done carefully and well, and we're ready as a campus to integrate these commitments into our activities moving forward.

I've just recounted a few examples of the enormous discovery strength we have shown individually and as a University community. These outcomes are the result of hard work, focus, interdisciplinary innovation, and commitment to service and our academic disciplines. The discovery path forward calls for continued and increased attention to interdisciplinary efforts--literally bringing our multiple strengths to bear to solve the world's challenges.
We are Discovery Driven, certainly. But there are two more pillars to our identity. We are Learner Centered and Globally Engaged as well, and those two qualities are at the core of the outcomes we seek.

**Outcomes that reflect a Learner Centered, Globally Engaged ID**

Outcomes, opportunity, commitment to student success and impact on society are WMU hallmarks, and they will continue to carry us forward. Student success is an outcome at the heart of all that we do. We have more evidence of progress from some new metrics for our University.

- Our fall census shows the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is now 79 percent. That's the highest it's been in 17 years. And that increase is due to your commitment to the success of our beginning students.
- And last week, we learned through a federal government examination of the graduation rates of students financially eligible for Pell Grants and those not eligible for such assistance, that we are a leader in our state and nation when it comes to making sure our Pell-eligible students succeed at the same rate as those with less financial need.

We know that our students and their parents are focused on outcomes in a way unlike those expressed by earlier generations of students. What our prospective students want as they come to us is our assurance that their years here will give them the skills--the hard skills--they need to start and succeed in a career. We, of course, can do that, and we have the data to show prospective students that their chances of such success are high if they attend WMU and complete a degree. In fact, we can document a post-graduate success rate of 89 percent.

But we're also in a position to help them succeed by inculcating traits and a mindset they may not yet realize they need. Those are the traits that come with a broad-based liberal arts education. It is paramount that we continue and enhance
our focus on a solid general education strategy and a campus environment geared toward developing citizens who are lifelong learners and engaged community members.

With that outcome in mind, I'd like to talk about three areas of focus that can distinguish us and provide the context and soft skills every student will need in the decades to come--regardless of their post-graduate paths.

**An inclusive campus**

Our students' success in any profession and in any place in the world will depend on their ability to live and work comfortably and respectfully with a diverse population. Western Michigan University is the most inclusive public university in Michigan. It is in our DNA and the commitment to diversity and inclusion dates back more than 100 years to our founding president Dwight B. Waldo. Reaching out and offering opportunity to students with potential, regardless of their background and the prevailing social views, Waldo led by example. That example was not always appreciated by some of our sister institutions at the time and some continue to struggle with inclusion today. On our campus, though it became the norm.

Today, our student body comes very close to mirroring the make up of our state's population, and we have broadened the definition of diversity to include the breadth of diversity that represents and includes all the populations we wish to serve. Do we have more to accomplish? Of course. We need to be continually vigilant about finding ways to attract students from diverse backgrounds. And we MUST work hard to ensure our faculty and staff are reflective of the populations we serve.

This academic year, we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Diversity and Multiculturalism Action Plan--DMAP--that, under the direction of Vice President Martha Warfield has served as our guide on this critical topic--and it has served us
well. Like any good planning documents, it needs to be revisited occasionally to see what kind of updating it might need. This is a year for us to accomplish that.

**A way for students to create unique credentials**

One initiative you'll be hearing more about in the coming months is truly a quality improvement initiative triggered by our work with the Higher Learning Commission. It is generating some excitement campuswide and has resonated with students and families who have heard a brief outline.

**Create Your Own Signature** is the name of a WMU initiative that will allow students to create an additional degree designation that recognizes the value added by the complete WMU experience. It would reflect individual student achievements beyond the formal degree requirements. A signature would reflect an intentional selection of learning experiences, projects, experiential learning and co-curricular activities that are tailored to a student's personal interests and accomplishment. A signature could reflect, for instance, global engagement, sustainability, entrepreneurism, urban development or civic responsibility.

This is an enhancement to our formal degree process--a way to maximize our learner-centered approach and provide a more sophisticated way to record and reward student achievement--and give our students an edge in their post-graduation lives. It has the potential to more clearly showcase a student's passions and skills and enhance interdisciplinary learning. An engineering major, for instance, might add a sustainability or fine arts signature.

The timeline is necessarily long to do something like this well. We're looking at a pilot offering next fall and full implementation the following year. I will confess to being impatient and wanting our students to have the benefit of such a program sooner. In the shorter term, I will encourage each of our faculty to consider carefully how such a fully implemented program could play out in their
discipline and to treat the development of such a program thoughtfully and with enthusiasm. It's an idea whose time has come.

**Internationalization**

And last but certainly not least, is a proposed initiative that plays off one of our core strengths and the life skills every one of our students will need--whatever they do and wherever they live. We must continue to internationalize our curricula and our learning community in a way that ensures every student leaves us with the tools to thrive in a global environment.

Over the years, we have as a University community benefitted greatly from the presence of an every-growing international student population. A growing number of domestic students have taken advantage of our Study Abroad programs. But there is so much more we need to do. Every student, whether or not they are able to study abroad, needs the opportunity to take advantage of the global marketplace.

The Faculty Senate's International Education Council and the Haenicke Institute have developed an outcome-based proposal called "Internationalizing the Student Experience: Preparing Students for a Globalized World." Its goal is to reach all students and prepare them to live in a world that has been irreversibly changed by globalization.

It's a three-pronged approach designed to increase and enhance study abroad opportunities, focus even more strongly on international recruitment and enrich the educational experience for all students right here on campus through the infusion of global content into new and existing courses.

Those working on this effort have developed a comprehensive proposal that has the ambitious goal of making sure every student is globally engaged whether they study abroad or not. It is an outcome and an approach that I strongly endorse. The Provost and I will be working with the Faculty Senate Committee to identify
internal resources to support faculty curricular development. We will seek external funding as well for the most costly but essential elements of our global initiatives because the advantages—personal and professional—that such global infusion will provide WMU graduates are limitless.

Closing

I've talked about a lot of outcomes today. Some we've achieved and others are promising points on the horizon still. There is one outcome, though, I want everyone here and everyone in this community to embrace and celebrate.

This month, 110 years after it opened, the birthplace of WMU will reopen its doors as Heritage Hall. On the outside, the building atop Prospect Hill will look much like it did when it opened in 1905--only better. And inside...well, just wait until you see.

What that building represents is the commitment this city undertook in 1903 to become the home to an institution of higher education. It was civic pride, marketing savvy, investment of resources and a vision for the future that led to the outcome they desired. Western Michigan University is here today because of their work.

I'm sure the satisfaction at achieving an important outcome was very much on the mind of those Kalamazoo citizens in 1905 when they saw the results of their work embodied in the walls of the building that has, ever since it's opening, served as "the Acropolis of Kalamazoo."

On Friday, Oct. 23, at 2 p.m., there will be a grand opening and a chance to celebrate an outcome that touches us all every day... Please be there.

Thank you for all that you do and always remember. It's a great day to be a Bronco.