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"A Signature Year: Building Community Connections": Kiwanis Luncheon

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(Opening slide#1) Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me back. It's been a bit more than two years since I was last here to speak with you. A lot has happened, since then, of course, but there is much still to accomplish.

This year--the academic year that begins in 12 short days--will be what I like to call a signature year in the life of Western Michigan University. There are a lot of reasons for my choice of the word "signature," and I will get to those in a moment.

But first, I want to address this week's "breaking news" because it is about important information I was going to share with you later in this talk. A Monday Detroit Free Press story that triggered news coverage across the state made me change my mind. I've reshuffled my slides and notes to take on a news story I think is emblematic of the mistaken information those of us who care about education must combat.

**Myths about higher education**

The Free Press story was a report on a report by an organization called Third Way attacking the graduation and career placement record of Michigan universities. The report zeroed in on two other universities, but it alluded to Michigan universities in general as "dropout factories," at which students have only a 50 percent chance of earning a degree, and end up making $25,000 or less annually. Unfortunately, that one story sums up the two great myths about higher education. Those two myths are that few students graduate and those who earn a degree find out the degree wasn't worth it. Third Way's misuse of data and inattention to the facts seems willfully designed to support those errant beliefs.
Those are beliefs that are just **wrong**--not differences of opinion, but factually wrong. There's no kind way to say it. The origin of the bad data that seems to support such beliefs is a long and complex story--one that I'm happy to explore if you'd like when we get to the Q&A period at the end of this talk. Rather than focus on it now, though, I'd rather share the real WMU facts--the data I hope you take away with you so you have an accurate view of this community's university.

**Graduation rates**

*(Slide #2)* New state data was released last month. Base on the 2014-15 year, the state report includes data on important groups of students not counted in the Third Way analysis--transfer students and part-time students. According to the new state data, 69.3 percent of WMU students--more than two thirds--graduate within six years. Our graduation rate, according to that new report is fourth among Michigan's 15 public universities.

And we know that if you continue tracking students past six years, that graduation rate continues to grow. In fact, when we track students out to eight years, we know that almost 90 percent of the students who began as freshmen with us have graduated from WMU or another institution or are still pursuing a degree at WMU or another college. Why the longer path to graduation? It's because many students simply need to stop out to earn the money needed to continue. And that's partly because our state's financial aid infrastructure has been dismantled and we no longer provide the kind of financial assistance to Michigan students we once did.

**Career success**

*(Slide #3)* Now here's some information that will allow you to counter with real facts the next time someone tries to tell you or our young people that earning a college degree is no longer worth it--that it won't lead to a good job.
We started six years ago to seriously track our graduates. We needed to know the level of success they found after graduation because we needed to know how effective we are as an institution. It's difficult data to capture. What I'm sharing with you today is the post-graduation success data for our entire population of 2014-15 graduates--undergraduate and graduate. We have data on 75 percent of the more than 5,000 students who graduated, and the data illustrates their success within three months of completing their degree. Let me first point out that three quarters of the students (75 percent) stayed right here in their home state.

(Slide #4) The data show that more than **88 percent** are successful. Success is defined as "actively engaged." That means they're working, continuing their education, serving in the military, self-employed or working part time. Of those, 87 percent of those working are employed in their field of study or a job related to their field of study.

And the median salary range for new working alums is in the $40,000 to $45,000 range. That 88 percent active engagement figure is the average. The $40,000 to $45,000 salary figure is the median. That means, of course, that more than half of our students had starting salaries of more than $45,000. Some began their careers with a starting salary above $80,000.

(Slide #5) There are multiple areas of study in which not only are 90 percent-plus actively engaged, but their median salaries are also at or above $60,000. Aerospace engineers, for instance, are at a 95 percent engagement level, with average salary levels of $55-60,000. Our celebrated integrated supply management major (No. 5 in the nation) has 90 percent of alumni engaged and earning in the $50-55,000 range. We're tracking high numbers for occupational therapists (91 percent and $55K-plus), nursing and physician assistant.
Bottom line: Earning a college degree is a life- and career-altering achievement. Our students succeed.

**Create Your Signature**

Our students graduate and they are successful in using the degree they've earned to find professional and personal success. That is a signature fact about Western Michigan University. It's also a fact upon which we're about to do some major building.

Starting this weekend, nearly 24,000 students will come back to campus and flood into the community with all of the energy and enthusiasm you can imagine. This year, they'll come back to a groundbreaking new way to apply that energy and tailor the credentials they earn to truly reflect the experiences that have been part of their degree path.

Create Your Signature is a pilot program this year that we expect to be available to every student next fall. *(Slide #6)* This is all about helping students be intentional about connecting their degrees to their interests and passions. Create Your Signature will ask students to identify and formally declare their interest in a pathway—a set of experiences—that will be formally tied to the degree they earn. What they accomplish on those pathways will be noted on both their diplomas and their transcript—giving future employers a better picture of the whole person and what they bring to the table.

A marketing major may opt for a health and wellness pathway that will leave him uniquely qualified for a professional position in the wellness industry. An accounting major may choose to focus on civic engagement or leadership in a way that will position her to focus professionally on the nonprofit world. An engineering major may choose entrepreneurship or perhaps sustainability as the pathway to success.
The trick is to intentionally identify and record successful completion of the activities that reflect a student's WMU experience both inside and outside the classroom. We want our students to apply what they learn in the classroom to the experiences that set them apart. We want them to develop experiences that will allow them to have an impact on their professions and chosen communities for decades to come. Much the way an internship is integrated into many majors, a pathway will become the opportunity to explore, engage and use their growing body of knowledge in a way that will be transformative.

These pathways can be very personalized and tailored. We want our students to define themselves as scholars, professionals, leaders and globally engaged citizens. And we want them to make a lifelong habit of linking their personal and professional development.

This value-added option is one we expect to become very popular--and one that will likely be emulated elsewhere. For the community, having more students looking for ways to share their passions and commitment beyond the classroom will mean even more interaction between students and businesses and community organizations. This is not volunteerism or even service learning but rather an intentional, strategic and formal way to address the needs of the whole student and help that whole person reflect on how to best impact the world he or she will live in.

For this community and communities around our state and nation, the outcome of students creating their own signature is a future full of citizens and employees who have learned to apply, leverage and make the most of their academic accomplishments. Stay tuned. You'll be hearing more.
Seita Scholars

There is, at Western Michigan University, a signature program that has attracted the attention and involvement of this community and has developed a national reputation. You may well be among those who have stepped up to make this the welcoming community that has made our Seita Scholars programs a success.

We launched the Seita Scholars eight years ago this fall to provide opportunity for a dramatically challenged group of young people--those who have aged out of our foster care system. Although they aspire to earn college degrees at the same rates as any other student, only about 5 percent of them were able to achieve their dreams when we started down this road.

We provided tuition, a place to live and call home year round, and the support of campus coaches 24/7. The program has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. We now serve some 140 students annually, and this year--December--we will see the 100th Seita Scholar walk across the Miller Auditorium stage to receive a degree. Our program for students has been hailed nationally for developing best practices for working with the foster youth population, and our Center for Fostering Success is now at the helm of a statewide network to put those practices to work in other Michigan colleges and universities.

All of this happened because good people on campus, in Kalamazoo and around the state embraced our Seita Scholars and have offered support to make the transition to college life easier for them. That support has ranged from major financial support from Michigan foundations to the generosity of individuals in our community. This week, for instance 53 welcome packs are being assembled for incoming students. The packs include such necessities as bedding and pillows, towels, laundry equipment notebooks and personal care items. As has been the case since this began, members of this community have stepped forward to help out--to donate items and
volunteer as mentors—to literally become the family and support system that can wrap its arms around a group of students who don't have a traditional family structure. We are profoundly grateful and proud of what your input has allowed us to accomplish. Thank you.

**Join us for a meal**

It is a transition time on campus. It's still very quiet, but by this time next week, we'll be in the throes of campus move-in activities and racing toward the Sept. 6 start of the academic year. There is one interesting new facility on campus I hope you take advantage of. On Sept. 1, we'll officially open our Valley Dining Center. It's a student dining center that is open to the community as well. If you ever have a desire to see what campus life is like in 2016, this is the best bet around.

Located across the street from Goldsworth Valley Pond, the dining facility features nine micro-restaurants—each with its own menu, theme and decor. You can pick from Asian cuisine, home-style classics, a grill menu, Latin food, a desert shop and a pastaria. Best of all, you can enjoy that rarefied atmosphere that comes with a gathering of some of the brightest and most energetic young people our state produces. Please step out of your dining comfort zone and plan to visit us there.

**Signing off**

Finally, and staying within the "Signature" theme, I should note that I have made the decision to retire—to sign off—next June from my role as the eighth president of Western Michigan University. The University is 113 years old and has had only eight presidents. I take great pride in the fact that that I have been privileged to be one of that small group and privileged to be a member of this community.

I announced that decision early in order to give the Board of Trustees time to conduct a national search and have a new president identified and maybe even in place by the
time of my retirement. Having that retirement date in site has not made me slow the pace. If anything, my "to-do" list is longer and the pace is faster than ever. I have a lot to accomplish and a lot of things I want to complete in a way that will make the transition to a new leader seamless.

Once I do retire, I will stay on, at the request of the Board of Trustees, for a year, working as a President Emeritus and taking on the requests of the board and my successor. Linda and I will always be thankful for the opportunity and sense of community we found here. I hope it is clear to all that my respect and affection for this University and this community will be sustained forever. I fully intend to be a supportive and helpful Bronco for the remainder of my life.

Thank you for the opportunity over the years to periodically share information with you about WMU. I've always enjoyed my afternoons with you. Now, I'd like to be respectful of your time and stop so that there is time for you to raise any questions you may have.