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Community Conversation-Center for Michigan Event

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Community Conversation-Center for Michigan Event
Dr. John M. Dunn
Fetzer Center
Nov. 30, 2016

- Good evening, and thank you for being here. Welcome to Western Michigan University and the Fetzer Center.
- This important event will likely be different than the one I had envisioned six weeks ago when I accepted an invitation from the Center for Michigan to welcome you all here to our campus and to this conversation. If anything, this evening's importance has grown in my estimation. The topic is "Where Do We Go from Here?" and it's about public trust in our state government and government services.
- Perhaps the most important part of this event is contained within its title. This is a "conversation." As defined by the American Heritage College Dictionary, a conversation is a spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions and feelings, a talk. Conversations have been regularly sponsored by the Center for Michigan over the past decade. They're productive and civil. I have been worried that during this political season, we have lost the capacity for conversation--for speaking thoughtfully and listening to an equally thoughtful response and for considering each other's ideas. Not coincidentally, I have feared that along with the loss of basic conversational skills, we've lost the capacity for trust.
- And we do need to trust in our fundamental societal institutions--in our communities; civic and religious organizations; our local, state and national elected governments; our state agencies; and in our schools. Those institutions are at their best when working together--and no one works well together without a basic level of trust. Tonight needs to be about sitting down and revisiting the idea of working together to make our state strong--of both understanding our differences and being willing to come to compromise positions that will make Michigan better.

- At Western Michigan University, we have taken real pride for more than 100 years in being a trusted partner of the communities we serve. Our role in such partnerships ranges from economic development and health care advancement to cultural enhancement and increasing opportunity for underrepresented populations. What we do together with the community is based on trust and built on trust. And there's more that we can and want to do.

By far the most important contribution we make to our state and nation is the preparation of young people for their roles in the community. We want our graduates to be informed, analytic, thoughtful and able to engage civilly in conversations, dialogues and debates. We want them to bring to their role as citizens, the same keen critical thinking skills that serve them so well in their professional lives.

This evening's event, this partnership with the Center for Michigan is another step in our ongoing effort to model the kind of citizenship and contributions that grow out of a strong higher education environment. Michigan's colleges and universities are really this state's key to a prosperous and peaceful future. And we're proud to be part of that journey this evening. I regret that I will not be able to be here for the entire conversation. Our student government body is expecting me for a presentation as well.

Leading us through tonight's conversation about our next steps as a State will be John Bebow, president and CEO of the Center for Michigan. Prior to joining the Center in 2006, he worked for 16 years as a professional journalist, mainly as an investigative reporter for The Chicago Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Detroit News, Ann Arbor News, and Traverse City Record-Eagle. He covered the 2003 invasion of Iraq for the Detroit News and Gannett newspapers. He also served as editor-in-chief of MLive.com, Michigan's largest online news and information service. He lives in Ann Arbor with his wife and daughter.

I take pride in noting that John's impressive career began right here at Western Michigan University. He earned a bachelor's degree in English with honors from WMU in 1990, and he was a student journalist here. Later, wanting to add some additional polish to his already stellar credentials, he earned an MBA with distinction from the University of Michigan Ross School of Business.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming to the microphone John Bebow.