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Presidential Scholars Convocation

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Presidential Scholars Convocation
President John M. Dunn
March 28, 2017

(You follow WSA Vice President Taylor Hall)

Opening

Thank you, Taylor, for those wonderful comments. As usual, my most difficult speaking engagements come when I have to follow one of our incredibly talented students. This evening is no exception.

Faculty Senate President Ayers has added her distinguished presence to the speakers' platform. The celebratory photos she and I take with each honoree at the end of the evening will be notable for their look of academic bookends--Dr. Ayers and myself--on either side of a distinguished student scholar.

This is one of my favorite events of the year--because of you, scholars. I frequently tell alumni and friends of the University about this remarkable gathering of talent. And each year, I read, with appreciation and amazement, the short bios in the program. They leave me moved and honored that you chose this great University to prepare for your life's journey.

This is the 37th such celebration organized by the Faculty Senate, and I guarantee the four presidents who preceded me at earlier events looked with the same kind of pride at the accomplishments of the Presidential Scholars who came before you. This is my final opportunity to host the event and welcome you. Next year a new president will play this role. He or she will be every bit as impressed as I am this evening.

Scholars, you have earned your department's respect and recognition, and you have been selected for the highest award a Western Michigan University undergraduate can receive. Congratulations. (Pause) for applause.

I would be remiss, and scholars you would be as well, if we did not take a moment to offer our thanks and congratulations to two important groups. First, of course are your families who laid the groundwork for your success and supported you throughout the years of hard work that brought you to this point. Please join me in a round of applause for them. (Lead applause.)

The second group is comprised of your faculty mentors who have been critical to your success here, and who, I know, will be watching your postgraduate progress with keen interest and great pride. Let's add a heartfelt "thank you" to them for a job incredibly well done. (Lead applause.)

What undergraduate education can be

Presidential Scholars, there are 50 of you being honored this evening. Each of you exemplifies the culture that makes Western Michigan University the learning environment that it is.

You've clearly taken advantage of our faculty's expertise in your disciplines. You'll be attending law, medical and graduate schools here and around the nation. You'll be welcomed to the ranks of such firms as PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Marathon and Steelcase. But you bring more than a professional skill set to your career path. You bring a wealth of qualities from your college experience--the Bronco culture--that will serve you for decades, both professionally and personally as well.

I'd like to focus on the four elements of your WMU education that, I hope were transformational and constitute a lasting impact on the way you live your lives as

professionals, community members and citizens. I've talked about one or two of them before in this setting, but I have never talked about them at a time when they under the kind of attack they are today.

These are the life skills that will lead to your success--and they cross every professional boundary. Many of you arrived here with some level of these lessons and beliefs already part of your arsenal. Others, I suspect, were more like me--young people whose life view was totally transformed by the university experience and who now understand that these four qualities can change the world.

So what are these magical gifts--the messages I hope you will take away from WMU and hold close? They're simple.

- One: Words have meaning and power. They can unite and they can divide.
- Two: Civility is the only way to move the conversation forward.
- Three: Discovery--science, the arts and humanities--can change the world.
- Four: Every human being has innate worth and is deserving of respect.

Words have power

First, **I believe**, and I hope you do now as well, in the power and meaning of words. Some people believe, as Lily Tomlin once said, that we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain. I don't believe that. I believe words have meaning and word choices can result in bridges built between people and between points of view. Words poorly chosen can also erect barriers. As Mark Twain once observed, "The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter. 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

Words can heal and they can wound. They can bring people together or set them on diametrically opposing paths. They can make people weep and make them laugh. There is nothing a community, an industry and the world needs more than individuals who

understand and know how to harness the power of words to bring people together and reach consensus.

You have learned here to choose your words well. You can own them proudly once you've used them. And you should own them. If you've been careless in your choice of words or simply wrong, be quick to admit it and offer an apology.

Civility

Words carefully chosen are the tools we use to engage in civil discourse. If there's one thing I hope you remember about your time here and this president's message to the University community, it is this: We can disagree. We can disagree vehemently. But while we disagree, we must always treat each other with respect. And we must acknowledge our opponents' right to express opinions at odds with our own.

That's a tough value to nurture in today's climate. We live in a time when what passes for news on many of our media outlets is really just a verbal barrage--two or more parties competing for the microphone in escalating voices. And you may have noticed there is never resolution to those disagreements or a consensus reached. The "victorious" opinion always belongs to the loudest voice. The loser is almost always the listener.

Michigan's former governor William Milliken once commented on exactly this situation when he said. "One thing I learned long ago is that raising the level of your voice does not raise the level of the discussion."

Former Gov. Milliken is right about volume being the enemy of quality. The most important ingredient to winning a debate is the ability to listen, to hear and consider your opponent's viewpoint and find the flaws in that viewpoint--IF there are flaws to

be found. Sometimes we discover that our strongly held opinions leave something to be desired and that our opponent's position is the better intellectual match.

I hope you leave us with the knowledge that your freedom of speech and expression carries with it a responsibility to allow those same freedoms to people with ideas and words that fly in the face of what we hold dear. I hope you've also learned by hearing beliefs shared in this marketplace of ideas that not all ideas are valid. Your own identity and beliefs may have been reaffirmed by the sheer wrongheadedness of beliefs espoused by others.

Discovery can change the world

Some of what you have done here is to simply explore the possibilities, to be curious and to use every asset the University has to offer. You leave here with not only your own discipline in hand but you've also had the opportunity to intellectually "wander" as one of our alumni puts it--not to be lost but to wander and explore.

Our intent was that you understand and respect the other disciplines that make up a great university. And that you treat those disciplines as the valued discovery sectors that they are. Taken together, the arts, business, the humanities, science, the social sciences, engineering and the health sciences will make this world a better and stronger place. Having citizens who understand how each contributes and interacts is critical.

WMU was the first university to require course work on the nonwestern world. More than 30 years ago, this was also the first university to require computer literacy of every graduating student. Even as you prepare to graduate, your University is reassessing and improving general education offerings to ensure a broad, comprehensive education is available to those who follow you at WMU.

As someone with a good grounding in multiple subjects, you'll have your work cut out for you. Lately, it has become politically popular in some circles to disparage the product of scientific inquiry as somehow insignificant and to discount or feign ignorance about both what has been accomplished and what the future holds. Too many conversations about important findings are peppered by such statements as, "I'm no scientist, but ..." That's usually a preface to saying science has it wrong.

Still others negate the value of knowledge gained over the centuries by declaring there are just too many anthropology, English lit, history, political science or philosophy majors. They are suggesting that those are areas of inquiry that are no longer valid.

Your message should be unambiguous and your advocacy strong. There are no simple paths in life and no discoveries without value. Every discipline can offer opportunity and an unforeseen Return on Investment. There are not "too many" of anything--except people who don't understand the power of each and every academic discipline.

Respect everyone

Finally, and most important, I hope the message you take away from your Bronco experience is one that applauds the value of diversity. Your carefully chosen words, commitment to civility and devotion to discovery should leave you with one inescapable lesson: *The qualities we nurture in ourselves and the ones we desire in friends and colleagues are found across humanity.* You've already met those diverse and future world changers here.

Discovery knows no limits. We do ourselves and the world a favor by recognizing that fact and allowing ourselves to be part of a world that is diverse--ethnically, geographically, politically, racially religiously and in every other way we sometimes feel ourselves pushed to feel different. That is the lesson I hope you most cherish and hold close.

Closing

You've transformed yourself here over the past few years. When you leave here, you will start a new chapter focused on growth and building upon the social and professional skills you've learned here. Please remember along the way to keep exploring and give yourselves permission to change and take advantage of new opportunities and ideas. And give those around you permission to do the same.

There's a favorite Mark Twain quote I ask you to consider carefully:

"Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

Safe travels. Thank you.