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Kappa Delta Pi Keynote

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• Good afternoon. Welcome to today's conference. For those of you visiting us from colleges and universities around the state of Michigan, I'd like to add my personal welcome to the campus of Western Michigan University. WMU Kappa Delta Pi students have been working hard to prepare for your visit, and we all want you to have an enjoyable day.

• By way of background, I should tell you that WMU began as a teachers college, and we've held on to that tradition even as our university has grown into a national research university. Our tradition of teacher education simply grew along with the university that is its home. We still produce great classroom teachers, but we also have applied the tools of a research university to the K-12 education arena. The building we are in--Sangren Hall--is home to our College of Education and Human Development. I think as you look around, you'll find that it embodies our historical strengths and our more recent focus on research.

• You've chosen to prepare for careers in education, I feel a special kinship with all of you. While I began my career as a high school teacher, my love for education goes way back to my days as a student in a three-room Catholic school in Pinckneyville, Ill. I believe I was drawn to teaching because of the teachers in my youth who motivated me to do more, be more and give back more. That ability to energize a student is certainly the key ingredient to being a good teacher.

• I became a teacher because others motivated me to take that path--some by example and some more directly by suggesting that teaching might be a good
career path for me. But what I found as a teacher was that motivation is a two-way street. That lesson has been reinforced by experiences I've had over the decades--as a student, a young teacher, a college professor and administrator and a school board member for a public school district in Oregon. All along the way, my professional development was guided and enhanced by what I learned from my students.

• As a teacher, I drew as much motivation and encouragement from my students as I believe I gave them. Thinking back on my early days in the classroom, the start of the path that eventually brought me to Western Michigan University rests with the motivation I got from working with one special student who showed me what my calling truly was and how I could best contribute.
  • (Story about working with student with disabilities in Lake Forest who first got you interested in working with that population and eventually propelled you on to graduate school.)

• I may have thought I was doing my best to motivate my students, but in truth, they were motivating me. That motivational synergy proved to be the hallmark of my career. I still am motivated by what I know of students--like many of you here in the room, today--to make this the best university it can be. I want all of our student body to be successful. If I can motivate students to take advantage of all that the university experience has to offer, then I've done my job.

• I've just told you a bit about the trajectory of my career and some of the beliefs that have supported me along the way. In retrospect, and as I look at the national environment today, I have to confess the path for me into the teaching profession was far smoother than yours may be.
In the late 1960s when I graduated and began my first teaching position, our nation held education in high esteem--much higher than it does today. The generation immediately before mine came home from World War II and took immediate advantage of the GI Bill, attending college for free. With the degrees they earned in America's colleges and Universities, they built the U.S. into an economic and political super power. They brought the country into an age in which anything was possible--from trips to the moon to finding long-sought cures for disease.

They also firmly planted the idea in families across the nation that college is for everyone, and the opportunities made possible by earning a college degree were opportunities to which everyone should aspire. Just think of how important that made our schools and the teachers who make everything possible. Teachers were the ones with the keys to children's futures. That's the kind of world in which I became a teacher.

But slowly over the past 50 years, public confidence in the quality of our basic organizations has dwindled. Sadly, our public school system is no longer the source of pride it once was for our nation's citizens. Today, according to the Gallup polling organization, just one in three Americans--34 percent--is extremely or somewhat confident in the quality of our schools. That's a drop of 24 percentage points since 1974.

That's the bad news about the professional world you are entering. The good news is that teaching and education still enjoy a higher approval rating than some of the roles in which we Americans have traditionally put our trust:
• The even better news is that what you will be doing in your career really will make a difference in the lives of young people. The profession you aspire to join is eagerly awaiting you. Today, your chosen profession is facing challenges different than those faced when I was a novice teacher, but some of those challenges will actually advantage you.

• One of the biggest challenges facing public education today is the impending departure of an entire generation of teachers--the baby boomers. They have already begun retiring, and the U.S. Department of Education tells us that over the next 10 years, 1.6 million new teachers will be needed--more than 150,000 each year. And that is happening at the same time enrollment in teacher education programs has dropped 30 percent nationally. Do the math and you see both the challenge for our schools and the opportunity for young people like you. I'm confident that math is the reason that WMU's Education Career Fair on Wednesday of this week will attract more than 110 school districts from around the nation. They're eager to hire highly trained young professionals like you.

• Those school systems hiring new teachers are looking for you. Superintendents know that Millennial teachers will have a bit different outlook than the generations that came before them. That's a good thing. The characteristics that define your generation are exactly the ones that district leaders now know are the keys to future
school district success. People who are idealistic, connected with others on a variety of levels and compassionate will win the day in the long run.

• While I was looking for the current Gallup approval numbers on education, I came across another Gallup 2016 survey of school superintendents. The survey offered seven qualities that could be used to assess how successful schools are. The superintendents were asked to rank them in order of their worth in determining success. Before I tell you, see if you can guess what the top three success indicators were for 88 percent of the superintendents surveyed. College acceptance rate? Standardized test scores? Graduation rate? Post-graduate employment?

• Here's the answer. An average of 88 percent of superintendents nationwide agreed that the top three success qualities were:
  - No. 1--**High school graduation rates.** Are students achieving their goals
  - No. 2--**Level of student engagement in school.** Are students taking full advantage of opportunities.
  - No. 3--**Hope.** Do students live each day with the expectation that the future is bright and anything is possible.

Standardized test scores finished dead last, by the way--not only with the superintendents, but also with a similar survey of adults nationwide.

• Hope and student engagement inevitably lead to increased graduation rates, but how do schools make sure those two qualities are part of the daily environment. That's where you come in. Your idealistic natures, your ability to connect and your commitment to change and being part of the solution is what is needed most now, and those in charge of hiring the next generation of teachers know it. They don't want just teachers. They want great teachers who will create the kind of learning
environment that will let students thrive. They want people who motivate students and who, in turn, find their own motivation in seeing students succeed. They want teachers who see each child and each family as unique. They want people who can connect with those children and families in a way that will make everyone--teachers, students and families, alike--proud to be a part of their school and confident in the quality of the education offered.

You have the potential to be the value-added factor that turns public perception around. A few minutes ago, I told you that only one in three Americans has confidence in our public schools. I also told you that only 9 percent is confident in Congress. But here's the thing. People--the vast majority of them--are confident in their own senators and congressmen. It's just the rest of Congress they can't abide. Your goal should be to make sure the students and families you serve feel the same about your school. Don't worry about the big stuff. This is the time to sweat the small stuff. One student at a time, one family at a time and the tide will turn. It may take years for public perception to swing again, but you can make sure your students and their families look back on their school years with appreciation and confidence. With any luck, the next president of WMU will be talking with a group some day that includes students you taught who fell in love with learning and want to motivate others to learn as well.

• I wish all of you joy and satisfaction in teaching and working with young people. May every student you work with motivate you to reach and excel. And may your students be motivated by what they learn from you and from watching you succeed as a teacher.

Q and A?