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## Nonprofit Leadership Celebration Remarks

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## Nonprofit Leadership Celebration Remarks

John M. Dunn

April 17, 2017

Good afternoon. I truly appreciate having the opportunity to speak with you today as the grant decisions made by class members in our nonprofit leadership course are announced. This is always a special event. It is the culmination of an annual class effort to disburse real money to real entities doing real work--good work--in our community.

This year's event hits home for me in two very special ways. First, is the fact that the class chose to focus on ways to help immigrants in our community. That means you've chosen to step into the political fray and react with honor to a question of national import. The second important aspect about this year's award decision process is the underlying lesson you learned as a class about choice and the need to use limited resources wisely.

I could not be prouder of all that you have accomplished this year. Your work demonstrates how public awareness, policy, education and experience can come together to benefit local organizations, recent immigrants and refugees, and your own education at WMU. There's a lot to be proud of. Students, your work has taken you out of the classroom during your time at WMU to find success and awareness in community agencies across the area. I understand that this spring's students in the nonprofit leadership minor will graduate having accrued some 6,000 hours of service to nonprofit organizations in our community. It is not difficult to understand why this program was named best in the nation in 2015 by the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance.

Janice Maatman informed me of the back story to this spring's grant focus. She mentioned that comments I made about President Trump's decision to ban immigrants from seven nations got you thinking. Those comments, along with the first-hand experience of a student in the course who is the child of undocumented immigrants, played a role in your decision as a class to focus on the plight of immigrants in Kalamazoo and Calhoun counties.

I was heartened by Janice's account of the class decision--heartened not because you agreed with me, but rather because you, as young professionals honing your skills here at WMU, recognized the inherent problems triggered by the president's Executive Order. You recognized the fundamental value that people from other nations and belief systems bring to our university, our students and our community. And you recognized that supporting people against whom the political tide has turned--through no fault of their own--is simply the right thing to do.

### **Good policy reflects real world impact**

As I said in my January comments on the topic, we do not, as a public university, normally take a political stand on an issue. Neither do we check our best judgment, knowledge and personal experience at the door. The question of immigration and being a welcoming institution for all students is a topic for which our experience as a university community can and should provide much-needed information that can inform public policy.

The knowledge that all individuals and points of view add value to our university community and our understanding of the world is something I learned as a young undergraduate from a tiny town in Illinois (Pinckneyville). I had the good fortune to attend a university with students from around the globe, and the lessons I

learned from those I met, worked and studied with there set me on my life's career path. (*embellish a bit with a story about your friend from Syria.*)

It was that experience, along with many others over the decades, that convinced me the Executive Order on immigration was a mistake that would sow confusion and fear among people who had done nothing but try to follow their dreams and be part of our university community. I was convinced in January and even more convinced today that the human toll may not have been fully vetted during the development of the executive order. We've seen that EO drive fear and uncertainty into our international student community. We've seen our international applications decline, and as a nation we're even seeing our tourism industry suffer because the United States is no longer considered a welcoming and inclusive nation.

You clearly have learned the power of inclusion. And you have learned the power your convictions have to make real change in the world. When setting the parameters for this year's grant initiative, you made the decision to focus your grant activities on initiatives that "provide housing, jobs, food, and education to people who are refugees and/or immigrants."

### **Competing goods**

And that leads me to the second important take-away from this spring's grant making work by this nonprofit leadership capstone class. You learned what is perhaps the toughest lesson there is in this arena. With 17 good proposals and only \$14,700 in grant dollars to distribute, you learned how hard it is to choose between "competing goods." It's a philosophical problem we face in the nonprofit world every day. Multiple "goods" of soaring importance can and do compete

with each other for limited pools of resources. Managing that competition is the great balancing act in which we all engage.

I'm told that all 17 proposals were so compelling that many of you wanted to change the ground rules and stretch those limited dollars to fund all the "good" initiatives. You wanted to give a little money to all good proposals rather than make the difficult decision to single out just five proposals and award larger grants that can have a stronger impact. You faced the classic dilemma that columnist Jonah Goldberg acknowledged when he said: *"Governing involves choosing and making choices between competing goods."*

The goals of each proposal and even the paths to achieve those goals were compelling. You had to decide which good goals had the best chances of being successful. Making those tough decisions was part of the learning experience. That's what this afternoon is all about--good goals and good decisions.

Students, many of you who are graduating this month, I look forward to shaking your hand as you walk across the Miller Auditorium stage to accept the diploma you've earned. Your predecessors in this program over the past 16 years are carving out reputations as caring, compassionate nonprofit executives who also can make difficult decisions. They're doing that in Washington, Lansing, around the world and right here with multiple nonprofit organizations in the Kalamazoo community.

We'll be watching with great interest as you use the lessons you've learned here on your career path. The qualities you've exhibited this semester, in particular, will serve you well. Compassion, engagement and commitment to those in need

should always remain your guiding principles. Do good work and always remember it's a Great Day to be a Bronco.