Excellence in Education Remarks

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Opening
Good evening. Thank you for that kind introduction.

This is not the first time I have had the privilege of speaking at the annual Excellence in Education event. Because I'm familiar with the event, my invitation to be here this evening was truly a pleasure to receive. What university president wouldn't welcome the opportunity to meet with students of your caliber, their proud families and their teacher/mentors? You are prime examples of what our school systems do very well.

For the families here this evening and on behalf of our community, I want to say thank you. You have done an outstanding job of preparing these young people for the next part of their journey to success. You must be very proud.

To the teachers, you have our admiration for providing the perfect balance of inspiration, guidance and trust that allowed these students to not just succeed, but excel. Students, please join me in offering a round of applause to the people--your families and teachers--who set the stage for your success.

Students, you inspire us with your achievements and cause us all to recommit our schools and campuses to find new ways to serve students like you who represent the next generation of our state's leaders. As you move forward with your academic careers, your college of choice will work extraordinarily hard move you toward the next step in your life path. I do hope to see some of you on the campus of Western Michigan University this fall.
I know that as you complete your studies in high school you take some lessons with you that were learned outside the classroom. Your schools have taught by example some important life and leadership lessons.

**Diversity—in its totality**

First, I'd like to suggest that outside the classroom, the most important lesson I hope you've learned is the value of diversity. That's a word that's become almost a caricature of the incredibly important value it describes. When we talk about diversity on my campus, we talk about it in its broadest meaning.

I hope you've come to respect and embrace the differences that each of us brings to our interactions with others. I hope you've heard and internalized the idea of civility in addressing some of the most contentious differences of opinion. I hope you enter your next school with the belief that differences are not just something you tolerate. Differences are something to be embraced and celebrated as a critical aspect of our society's strength.

Differences of race, religion, gender and ethnicity are just the beginning. Those are the easy ones to recognize. Differences of beliefs and world views can be more contentious. On my campus, it can be as easy as a walk past the display zone at the center of campus to remind us that not everyone shares our background or expounds views we endorse. But even the most egregious political or religious differences expressed there are a reflection of our strength and commitment to freedom of speech.

Our strength as a university and as a society comes from considering and sometimes embracing the value of the differences we all bring to the table—differing viewpoints, geographic backgrounds, political philosophies, learning styles and even temperament. The more we embrace the differences in others, the more we give ourselves permission to be who we truly are and not fit into someone else's idea of what constitutes the ideal.
The Extravert Ideal

Here's an example. For many years, we have celebrated learning and workstyles that revolve around teamwork and continual communication in an open group setting. We have come to value what one best-selling author calls "the extrovert ideal." Our schools and our business models are built around this ideal. Think about cubicles, open office environments, team meetings and group brainstorming. Being an extrovert is almost mandatory in those environments, and parents often worry when their children are not outgoing or extraverted enough to fit that ideal.

A funny thing has happened over the past few years, though. Research from universities around the nation has documented what a significant part of the population already knew. We're not all extraverts. In fact, some of our most productive people and historical heroes are or were introverts--Albert Einstein, Mother Theresa, Rosa Parks, Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel--GUYsehl), Chopin, Steve Wozniak, Bill Gates.

If the research is correct, more than a third of the people in the room this evening are introverts--people who work better in quiet and solitary environments and prefer an evening with a good book to a night out with friends. And there's evidence that such preferences are not learned personality traits but rather something hardwired into our brains. These studies are laid out in a best-selling book by Susan Cain--"Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking."

Cain and the researchers she follows have also discovered that building our infrastructure and systems around that extravert ideal is not beneficial. It is counterproductive for introverts who valiantly try to remold themselves to match the extravert ideal.
It is counterproductive as well, Susan Cain tells us, because discussions are too often carried by "the loudest, not the brightest" people in a group. That's something many of us have already figured out as well from watching cable news shows.

Cain predicts a "quiet" revolution may be coming. As those people who revel in solitude come into their own, the next activist group may well rally around the cry, "Introverts of the world unite." This may not be as far afield as you might think. A local newspaper viewpoint written by a staunch introvert sagely noted that "E=MC² was not the work product of a party animal."

The next generation of professionals--your generation--may well have the responsibility to reimagine, rethink and rebuild our systems in a way that ensures we're receptive to and able to release the creativity of the next Albert Einstein, Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, Steven Speilberg, J.K. Rowling or Charles Darwin.

The point is simply that when we fail to recognize and embrace the unique ways people interact with the world, individuals inevitably suffer. Our society as a whole suffers as well because we miss out on having the full and efficient participation of all people with significant gifts to share. When we recognize that each of us adds value in his or her own way, we grow as a society.

If you've learned to recognize that value, you'll find it easier to accept your own unique style and capacity. Your own growth as a citizen and a professional is enhanced when you give yourself the space to be who you really are. Your ability to accept the diverse background and traits of others gives you permission to demand (quietly, if you're an introvert) that others respect what's unique about you.

**Three more values to carry forward**
I also remind the students we're celebrating this evening to embrace and nurture the qualities that brought you here this evening. Move forward in your lives and careers by holding steadfast to those values.

- Keep learning,
- Keep asking the questions that lead to discovery, and
- Always be ready to share what you have learned with others in your workplaces, in your communities and in your nation and world.

**Closing**

Congratulations. We are all enormously proud of you. I know your families and teachers will be watching your progress for years to come. Your achievements will enhance the reputation of your school and your community. Take a moment to revel in your success and who you are, and please know that this is just the beginning of great things to come. Thank you.