9-21-2012

State of the University (September 2012)

John M. Dunn

Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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Good afternoon.

First, I must add my congratulations to our award winners. They represent exactly the qualities and commitment I will talk about today. I could not be more proud of them and the colleagues they represent.

There are 11 award winners this year and they represent the breadth of academic disciplines and the services we offer so well to our students. On the academic side, we have honored scholars from the hard sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. Our non-faculty honorees represent departments on campus that advise and nurture students and keep them safe, healthy and nourished.

I’d like our 11 honorees to rise so we can give them one more round of applause. (Honorees stand and accept applause.) I also ask the audience to recognize another group whose daily support and feedback help build the environment that makes our honorees’ achievements possible. Those of you who are departmental colleagues of those honored, please rise so we may acknowledge your role as well.

And we would be remiss if we not also ask the family members of our honorees to rise and be acknowledged for the support that made their loved ones’ accomplishments possible.

Thank you.

Listening to the career paths and accomplishments of our awardees caused me to reflect on the quality of this institution. This is a place where big, bold ideas develop and are acted upon—where disciplines are born, where technology blossoms, where creative work thrives and where the idea of service to humanity is practiced and inculcated in our students. We take good ideas and we run with them. We know how to adapt and change, sometimes leading the way for all of higher education.

A staff member recently pointed out, for instance, that 30 years ago this academic year, Western Michigan University became the first university in the nation to launch a requirement that all of its students learn basic computer literacy before graduation.

I want you to think about that for just a moment. This was the FIRST university in the nation to recognize and act upon the idea that computers would become critical in the lives of all students—from the art major to the historian to the geoscientist. The idea to make computer literacy an integral part of University life was first announced by one of my predecessors, President John Bernhard, during a State of the University address on Sept. 21, 1982—30 years ago today.

Thirty years ago, when everyone at Western Michigan University—including some of you—were tackling technology and becoming computer literate, I was a faculty member in an academic department at another institution. That year, our department got its first computer. It was in a box on the floor. The box stayed on the floor and we circled it waiting for it to do something. Finally found a
graduate student who knew how to use it. We were not yet as bold or savvy as the faculty, staff and students of this great University.

Listening to the accounts shared today and reflecting on all that I know about this institution also reminded me of the fact that this academic year marks the 40th year since my own first faculty appointment at the university level. Times were different then. We had no computers, no email or voice mail (and for the Dunns, at least, no money.) It’s been a good journey since then.

After 40 years in the profession, I can truly say my only regret is that only five of those years have been spent here at Western Michigan University—an institution I regard as the best of the best. It is truly a marvelous place in which to be a faculty or staff member or a student. And it’s in a marvelous community.

**State of the University**

As is tradition, the topic of my remarks this afternoon is the “State of Our University.” This year, I deliver that assessment at a time of incredible energy and accomplishment. It is also a time when we have coalesced around a strategic plan and settled on language that describes the essence of this University.

So let me channel both qualities this afternoon and tell you with great confidence that Western Michigan University is a learner-centered, discovery-driven and globally engaged University that is vibrant, focused, healthy, efficient and committed to the well being of our students and our nation.

- Being learner centered means learning is the core activity of every member of our community—from the youngest dual-enrolled student to the most senior administrator—including the president.

- Our discovery-driven nature refers to discovery in its broadest sense, from the science lab to the studio, to the solitary creative enterprise—the thought process.

- And global engagement allows us to add value to the experience of our international students and colleagues at the same time we learn from them and to encourage greater numbers of our students to participate in a study abroad experience.

**Enrollment**

We begin this academic year with 24,598 students of extraordinary diversity and quality. As I detail our enrollment trends this year, I urge you to think about how the qualities our students bring to this university dovetail with the three tenets of our strategic plan—being learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged. The trends we’re seeing reflect changing demographics and changing ways of learning, but they also reflect continuing commitment to our basic academic values.

- First, I must tell you our **international enrollment** has grown by nearly 13 percent this fall, with increases of 78 percent in Japanese students, 35 percent in students from China, 21 percent in students who hail from Saudi Arabia. We also have new groups of students from Iraq, Turkey, Brazil and Indonesia.

- Among our **graduate** students, we saw a 2.4 percent increase in those working toward a master's degree.
Our Lee Honors College saw another extraordinary increase this fall, growing to 1,613 students—a better-than 60 percent increase over the past five years.

We saw a 3.6 percent increase in enrollment at our regional locations.

The number of African-American students increased by 4.2 percent, while we have 3.4 percent increase overall in the number of minority students.

And the number of our students who are enrolled and taking online courses grew by 44 percent, continuing the explosive pattern of growth we've seen over the past few years.

All of this reflects the fact that we must continue the successful work we have done over the past few years to sustain our values and our ability to change and be responsive as the world changes and offers opportunities and challenges. In online education, for instance, our students are voting with their enrollment and we are listening to them. We’re providing traditional online courses, but also innovating with hybrid courses that give students the best of both worlds.

We’ve identified the enrollment mix we want and need to operate at peak efficiency, but we are not there yet. This fall, we are seeing a small dip—less than 2 percent—in our total enrollment. That dip is largely the result of smaller classes among our undergraduate upperclassmen. This year’s seniors, for instance, represent a smaller entering class than the one we “lost” earlier this year to graduation. Our beginning freshman class as well is a bit smaller than we’d like to see. We will begin this fall with nearly 3,200 new freshmen. We continue to closely track enrollment variations, demographic trends and institutional needs. We anticipated all of this and adjusted our budgets accordingly.

Accomplishments

It is easy to understand the attraction that WMU holds for students at every level. Since our last gathering of this kind, we have celebrated a variety of accomplishments and will continue to do so as this new academic year unfolds.

We opened a new Center for the Humanities that now serves our campus and the broader community by sponsoring events and lectures that focus on the big ideas of our time.

We accepted the gift of a home for our medical school and named it the W.E. Upjohn Campus of the WMU School of Medicine. That school is striding forward with curricular development, accreditation review, new department chairs and faculty, and the merger of the former Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies into the new medical school. This strategic alliance with Borgess Health and Bronson Healthcare is moving rapidly to fruition, and our community will be changed forever because of this new resource. We expect to welcome our first class of medical students just under two years from now.

Our work on sustainability has been recognized externally, and during the past year, we have been named one of American’s top Green Colleges by the Princeton Review and the U.S. Green Building Council.

We erected a solar array to power 15 new electric-vehicle charging stations bringing our total number of stations to 20, making WMU among the most “plugged in” universities in the nation.

We accepted transfer of the Michigan Geological Survey to our Department of Geosciences. What I like to call the “rock archive” provides our geologists with a wealth of research resources and...
incalculable ways we can serve the citizens of our state as we help protect our water, discover energy reserves and preserve the natural environment.

- Recognizing that change requires thoughtful direction, our campus community—faculty staff and students—came together in a thoughtful and deliberate way in a committee led by Provost Tim Greene to develop and embrace a new strategic plan—a plan in which I take great pride. In December, our trustees formally adopted that three-year plan.

- Our first class of aviation students to successfully complete our FAA-endorsed air traffic control program has just graduated. They enjoy a wonderful edge and will likely be included in the next round of FAA hiring later this fall. We are one of only 36 schools in the nation the FAA has tapped to offer this credential.

- Our service to the nation’s veterans was recognized for the second consecutive year when WMU was named by Military Times’ Edge magazine as one of the nation’s select few colleges that are “Best for Vets.” At the same time, we were able to boost our ability to serve our vets even further when we joined with Kellogg and Kalamazoo Valley community colleges to attract a rare Veterans Administration VetSuccess location on our campus—only the 12th university in the nation and the only one in Michigan to be so designated. We truly are Michigan’s educational home for vets.

- This past year, we saw the first four-year graduates from our Seita Scholars program for foster youth walk across the Miller stage to receive their diplomas. There are now 15 Seita graduates and our program has been recognized by state and federal lawmakers and with private funding as a program that is leading the way nationally in this important area of making sure everybody counts.

- And our students enjoyed living in Western View, our first new undergraduate housing in decades. A second phase of that popular apartment-style residence is now under construction and will be available next fall.

Over the past year, our students’ accomplishments have included winning an international trombone competition, a CNN student film contest, a national green vehicle competition and capturing a top team designation with a national automotive engineering organization. Our athletes won a Mid-American tennis championship and a CCHA college hockey championship, and our volleyball team earned a trip to the NCAA tournament. And we also went to a bowl game.

We broke ground this summer on our new Legacy Collections Center to house the archival materials entrusted to us. Just yesterday, our trustees approved naming that center for Charles and Lynn Zhang, two alumni whose longtime generosity has supported many important efforts at our University.

And next week, Friday at 6 p.m. to be precise, we will officially celebrate and open the spectacular new Sangren Hall and the dramatic transformation of our core campus that construction effort included. We’ll also be showcasing the new additions to the Lee Honor College. Please plan to be part of that seminal moment for our University community.

Each of these accomplishments illustrates our commitment to the success of our students and the well being of our nation.

**Our place on a new ranking system**

If that last phrase—doing the right thing for our students and for our nation—sounds familiar, there’s a reason. It is the basis for an unexpected and welcome recognition we received a few weeks ago.
Let me set the stage. This is college-ranking season—Princeton Review, Forbes, U.S. News & World Report—all offer their own variation of educational quality assessment. Their metrics range from traditional qualities like selectivity, alumni involvement and graduation rates to the truly absurd like “Rate My Professor” and “Who’s Who” lists. Our University is recognized at varying levels on most such rankings, and we note the more relevant of the lists for the benefit of prospective students—as we did last week when the U.S. News ranking was announced and we were on the list of the “best national universities” for the 22nd year in a row. That's where we belong.

Three weeks ago, we learned our University was included among the top 100 schools in the nation on a relatively new annual ranking. It features a set of metrics that should resonate with our entire campus community.

Washington Monthly identifies a list of schools that are best for their students and best for our country. The magazine uses metrics to identify which institutions—public and private—are best at:

- Producing cutting-edge research and doctoral graduates,
- Encouraging students to give back to the nation through service,
- Recruiting and graduating low-income students.

Using those criteria, the magazine gave its highest marks to “colleges that are both effective and inexpensive” characterizing those colleges as offering the “biggest bang for the buck” to be found in all of higher education.

This particular ranking took me by surprise. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized why I found our inclusion on that list so compelling. It is simply because it is a way of characterizing what I have come to realize is Western Michigan University's essence.

It is simply this. We are a value added university.

We roll up our sleeves and add value to the student experience for all students who come to us ready to be successful. They come from diverse backgrounds and with varying levels of accomplishment. We remain proud of our ability to provide access across the spectrum of the citizens we serve, proudly working with and learning from first-generation college students who are finding their way in unfamiliar territory. We also serve some of the nation’s most gifted young people who have managed to distinguish themselves academically and are ready to push opportunity to the limit.

All of our students breathe life and vitality into our community, and we must continue to find ways to make each student successful. Our responsibility, collectively, is the success of our students.

We add value to our community through research and discovery, economic development and by offering an infusion of cultural and educational resources to those we serve.

**Continue to be bold**

Moving forward, we need to continue to be bold. Our success is measured by our ability to adapt and to change. We all know that the only real constant in life is change! Institutions must change, and so
we are. But our approach to change is to reflect, to be proud of our history, to acknowledge our strengths and to also understand areas where we can be better.

We can do more and make a difference, and we need to do so because it’s the right thing to do. I ask the members of this University community to focus this year on two important tasks.

- Promoting the goals and internalizing the success indicators of our strategic plan—adding more value to our students’ experience.
- Advocating for higher education—positioning not just WMU, but higher education in general.

Support for Our Strategic Plan

My first challenge to you will sound deceptively easy. To help us inculcate the pillars of our strategic plan and ensure every member of our campus community knows the basics, I’d like you to begin by “talking the talk.”

There are three things we want everyone—students, alumni, neighbors, community leaders, faculty and staff—to know about our University.

We are:

- Learner centered
- Discovery driven and
- Globally engaged.

That needs to become our mantra. Use it in your classes. Get in the habit of looking at what you do and identifying how it fits into one of the three pillars and the metrics of our strategic plan. Ask your students to do the same. Use it in presentations. Find your own shorthand for communicating it comfortably, but keep it front and center.

My second challenge is a bit more complex but it boils down to this. I’m asking you to help me “walk the talk.”

As a higher education institution, we have a dual responsibility to our students. I’ve heard it best expressed recently as the external and internal educational experience. The external refers to the rigor and design of our course work—making sure our students leave us with the finest possible credentials in their discipline. We do that well.

The internal experience is more about the helping our students develop patterns of thought and leadership, curiosity and creativity, the ability to set goals and establish a focus. It’s about helping them incorporate those qualities into their personal and professional lives. We do that very well too, but we can and should expand our efforts.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could ensure that every student leaves this university with a significant experiential credential—an internship, a study abroad experience, a record of service learning, a community project, a professional practicum, a research study, or a culminating experience such as a
senior design project, recital or exhibit. And that credential should be reflected in a way that the student can easily showcase it, such as in an electronic portfolio.

If we could guarantee that every student will leave us with a healthy balance of external and internal education and have at least one tool that can demonstrate that balance, that would truly be evidence of the distinctive learning environment that is part of our strategic plan. It would be a bold move in keeping with our history of educational innovation.

At the beginning of this talk, I mentioned a time 30 years ago when this University set computer literacy as its goal. That was a bold move, but one with a surprisingly simple basis. When you look at the news stories from the period, it is clear that this University was taking what it already did well and moving it to the next level—not for acclaim but because it was the right thing to do. President Bernhard and the principals knew that perhaps 70 percent of WMU students would easily meet the minimum literacy standards because WMU was already on the leading edge. It was that other 30 percent they wanted to reach, and they knew that those students would need those skills every bit as much as the ones who were already savvy.

It was simple. It was the right thing to do. And it was also bold because no one else had made that final leap. But this University did.

The guaranteed experiential experience for today’s student is in somewhat the same situation. The majority of our students may already meet the requirement, but we have not formalized a way to document and help them benefit. And there are students we still need to reach—perhaps the ones who more than anyone need a chance to translate those external education skills into something more internal and transformational.

I’m proposing, today, consistent with our strategic plan, that we chart a course to implement our experiential initiative so that when we gather at this time next year we will have parameters and tools in place to begin. That would allow time to examine the wide range of experiences that might be included when a large multifaceted university embarks on such an initiative. To that end, I intend to work with the provost to establish a campuswide committee to develop a working plan that addresses the types of experiences covered and the technical issues that come with documenting those experiences.

**Support for Higher Education**

And finally, I ask each of you, in ways big and small, to join with me in reaching out to tell the story of what we do, how we do it and why it is important. At no time in our history has there been a greater need for such proactive outreach. Public perception AND understanding of higher education is at an all-time low—even as college attendance has become recognized as a necessity.

We need to communicate in every setting, the value proposition that we offer and the lifetime benefit of having an academic degree. We need to be candid about the costs and the advantages of a public university—especially one like this one that has worked so hard to keep tuition at a level that ensures broad access.

We need to proudly articulate what happens in our research labs and creative suites and be able to remind friend and foe that so many of the conveniences of modern life—from Google, MRIs and GPS to low food prices and cancer diagnoses—came from basic research that was conducted in university laboratories. That research was often done by someone with no final product in sight but an abiding
curiosity triggered by an interesting observation. Our neighbors might chuckle about thousands of federal dollars invested to understand “Acoustic Trauma in the Guinea Pig.” When the laughter ends, it may be our responsibility to note such research led to the treatment of hearing loss in infants.

And we need to be forthright in reminding our representatives and the executive branch that the state—this state—has a responsibility to keep our universities accessible and at the quality level our nation needs to continue its leadership around the globe. In this state, like so many others, higher education has seen dramatic cuts to institutions like ours, resulting in tuition increases. But just as destructive—actually doubly destructive—is the loss of state scholarships for our students. We need to let our communities know that we are fighting for their students’ future when we lobby for the return of programs like the Michigan Promise Scholarship that have disappeared at the time they are most needed.

I like to say the best stimulus program can be found in the young men and women in colleges and universities around the country. And I can think of no better investment for our state and federal government to make than to secure their future—our future—through education.

Because I’m the president of a University, that may sound self-serving.

The service, though, is really to young men and women like Jordan Adams, a global and international studies major and Air Force ROTC member from Sand Creek, Mich. Jordan couldn’t be with us today, but I wanted to mention him because I was captivated by the initiative and citizenship he demonstrated just a week into the fall semester.

Last week was the 11th anniversary of 9/11 and the attacks on our nation. We had not, as a university, planned any special event to mark the day. Jordan wondered why, thought someone should organize something and then said, "Why don’t I do it?" He decided that at least a quiet remembrance was in order. He contacted Vice President Jan Van Der Kley and asked if his ROTC unit could honor the fallen by putting up the Seibert flag, posting two unit members with hourly rotation, and lowering the flag at the end of the day. The solemn honor guards from both the Air Force and Army ROTC units stood silently at attention from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

I know people in the administration building and others on campus were incredibly moved by the simple act of honoring the fallen—entirely organized by one student who thought an opportunity for remembrance would be otherwise missed. That is the kind of student and citizen that we serve at this great University.

Thank you for all that you do every day to make this the kind of institution it is. I look forward to working with you throughout a coming year that holds great promise.

Today, as is true any day, it’s a great day to be a Bronco!

Thank you.

John M. Dunn, President