10-4-2013

State of the University (October 2013)

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State of the University 2013

Academic Convocation

Oct. 4, 2013

Good afternoon honorees and guests, community members, students, faculty and staff members.

Together, we have just heard a litany of accomplishments by 13 people whose work every day on our campus has added immeasurably to our commitment to be an institution that is learner centered, discovery driven and globally engaged.

- We've heard incredible stories of staff members who are totally committed to our students' personal and professional development. That is what being a learner centered institution means.

- We learned of the discovery-driven research and scholarship that is acclaimed around the world and is at the heart of everything done by our gifted faculty. We've heard about research and scholarship that inspires student creativity, enhances our state's economic and environmental health and sets the benchmark for questions for a new generation of scholars to address.

- And threading through every accomplishment was a sense of our global engagement—a faculty scholar's devotion to language study, a researcher's efforts to help another nation manage its research awards, and a faculty member's work with her students in an international setting.

What we've just heard is truly cause for the celebration of those characteristics that speak to the very heart of who and what we are. I'd like to ask today's honorees to rise as, together, we thank them
once again with our applause for what they do every day to make this the University community what it has become.

Who we are

Those three qualities—being student centered, discovery driven and globally engaged—were selected as the pillars of our strategic plan two years ago for a reason. They weren't simply plucked from the firmament as phrases that sounded nice. They reflect who we are now, who we have been for many decades and what we intend our identity to be for decades to come. They are our traditions—closely held traditions that date back generations, some to our very beginnings as an institution. They are essentially part of our DNA. They epitomize the University ideal—tradition in the finest sense of the term.

The State of the University

The traditions of Western Michigan University and the people behind those traditions—like those we've just honored—illustrate the state of our academic community.

The State of Western Michigan University is strong, full of challenges that reflect the times we live in, full of opportunities that reflect the future we intend to have and firmly rooted in the traditions and innovative spirit that have made us the University we are today.

Our enrollment successes and challenges, reported earlier this month, will set our agenda for the coming months and years. The basics are strong. We see:

- Significant growth in both the number and quality of our entering freshman class.
- Strong growth in the number of international students—up 7.5 percent to bring us nearly 1,700 students from 105 different nations.
- An increasingly diverse student body
- Renewed strength in our graduate programs, especially at the doctoral level
- Strong growth in several colleges and disciplines.

Every member of this University community who has risen to the challenge to help strengthen our recruitment outreach deserves and has the gratitude of this University. Our community has come together over the past several years to truly make student recruitment part of each individual's role. Collectively, we are talking more frequently and with greater pride about our University. Enhancements have been made in our services and outreach to students. These things have worked, but we cannot relax and become complacent. In a state with declining numbers of high school students, we need to work hard to continue to increase our share of an ever-smaller market and find new student populations that can benefit from the world-class education we offer.

Our success in attracting new students is not evenly spread across our disciplines. The reasons are many and some are outside our immediate control or, for that matter, not within the control of the academic units where those declines have occurred. Where we see strength and growth, we must support that strength with new resources and help that growth continue. Where we see decline, we
must assess and re-evaluate but also provide support in a way that ensures the great traditions and opportunities that are part of a sound university education remain part of our students’ experience.

Our job is not only to educate the students who come to us. It is also to educate the communities we serve about the importance of producing graduates who possess not just skills for a job or vocation, but also the knowledge and analytic ability to succeed personally and professionally for a lifetime. Let us be clear, this institution has a long and rich history in the humanities and social sciences and the arts. Our commitment to the centrality of those disciplines in all of our programming will remain steadfast.

Achievements over the past year

Enrollment is our key practical concern. It sets the stage for what we can accomplish. Intrinsically tied to enrollment success is our success as an academic community. Our achievements over the past year have been significant. They foreshadow a coming year of even greater achievement.

- We completed our first successful year of implementing our three-year strategic plan. We’ve completed some initiatives aimed at achieving goals of the plan, and others continue. One of the biggest accomplishments was to inculcate strategic planning into our campus culture. That work continues.

- After extensive planning, a diverse campuswide group helped develop and implement a Campus Diversity Climate survey. We’ve reviewed and shared the results—just this week—and have identified our strengths as well as next steps to address those areas where we are not all we can be. There’s room for improvement. We will continue to take those steps that build an inclusive and welcoming environment for every member of our faculty, staff and student body.

- We received national honors for some of our signature campuswide efforts—service to veterans and a focus on service learning. The Obama administration singled out WMU as the only Michigan school noted for "leading the way" to foster postsecondary educational opportunities and to dramatically improve employment outcomes for returning service members. Meanwhile, the Corporation for National and Community Service has named Western Michigan University to a select list of the nation’s colleges and universities that earned a slot on the 2013 President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll With Distinction. Just 100 schools in the nation earned that accolade, and part of our success can be attributed to the more than 600,000 hours of community service and volunteer work our students completed the prior year.

- Our sustainability achievements continue to attract state and national attention. Early in 2013, we were able to announce six new LEED-certified buildings on campus, bringing our total of such buildings to seven. Later in the year, the Detroit Free Press honored the campus with one of its annual Green Leaders awards. And if you keep an eye on developments in October, you will hear about even more achievements on the sustainability front.

- New physical enhancements on our campus signal our direction forward. After decades of work and an equal amount of time in real fear for the safety and long-term viability of our region’s historical records, the Zhang Legacy Collections Center is about to open as the new state-of-the-art home to that legacy material. And our 21st century vision for the Business Technology and Research Park will rise to a new level of realization with the opening, in a few months, of Newell Rubbermaid’s design and innovation facility. It will be the main such design site for some 40 marquee consumer brands like Graco, Sharpie and Calphalon. This newest addition to the Park will expand opportunities for collaborative research with faculty and student internships.
Our School of Music successfully completed its drive to become an All-Steinway School, with 118 of those wonderful pianos in place just in time for the School's 100th anniversary. We're very proud of our School of Music and the fact our students and faculty can practice and perform on these instruments.

And many of the items I've just mentioned and other I will talk about still today have received the support of our donors—with a total of $64.8 million in gifts received during the 2012-13 year. Our development officers, deans and so many others have done a spectacular job in telling our story and helping friends of this University understand how they can be a part of that story.

These are just some of our major accomplishments since we last gathered here. There are many more—in every college and division and at every stage of development. In each of those items I just outlined, you will find elements of our traditions—the pillars of our strategic plan.

**Change as a tradition**

Three pillars—learner centered, discovery driven and globally engage. They're our tradition and they're part of our DNA. But our traditions are also about change—about learning, discovering and engaging in new ways with new partners and constituents.

Tradition is a good thing not because it is focused on the status quo, but because it can provide a framework for new thought and for new generations to apply tradition in new and innovative ways.

As W. Somerset Maugham once said: "Tradition is a guide and not a jailer."

Change is the WMU tradition we don't talk about as much as we should. We do change very well—once we decide to embrace it. There is not a period of significant accomplishment in this university's history that did not involve great change—sometimes the change was painful, but more often, I think, it was an exhilarating and refreshing.

If we go back to our earliest years, Dwight Waldo's presidency was all about change—and sometimes it was change others did not understand as essential to the long-term health of the institution. In 1913, he bought the land on which Waldo Stadium and our athletic complex now stands. Let's just say, it had its drawbacks. Using it would require rerouting Arcadia Creek, draining a pond and tiling a swamp. This history lesson also reminds us that there are historical roots to ideas of oars and foghorns in connection with Bronco athletics.

Waldo made it work because he was convinced that having top-notch athletic facilities was the key to attracting young men to college and the teaching profession. He made choices and supported change to do what he believed best to provide opportunities for students.

Dr. James Miller's world view helped Western Michigan University change into an international institution in the 1960s. During turbulent times when some public institutions opted to turn inward, our newly minted university was reaching out to build a technical college in Nigeria and became a training site for Peace Corps volunteers. It was change that asked people to operate outside their comfort zones, but it had real impact and today, we take enormous pride in our long history of global engagement.
Today, we're welcoming into our classrooms the children of many international students who have studied with us over the years. We have people around the world whose world views, careers and lives were shaped by what they learned with us. I had the opportunity this summer to meet in Tokyo with the 50th anniversary alumni class from that nation. You could not possibly find people who are more passionate about this University. Fifty years from now, we are likely to have pockets of such engaged alumni in more than 100 nations.

And finally, let's look back to more recent times and a period of enormous change at our University. There are many people—some here today—who look back with great fondness to the arrival of Dr. Diether Haenicke on campus and his challenge that Western Michigan University become a research university. Challenging? Of course. A rewarding period of change? Absolutely.

Today, we are one of five Michigan research universities. Our researchers are answering the basic questions their disciplines have struggled with for years. Others are leading efforts that translate their expertise and knowledge into initiatives that have major economic development implications. Such researchers are among today's honorees. Having earned this stature, our university is now one that our state and nation's leaders turn to for input and management of the important issues of the day. It's the reason our state, for instance chose to house the Michigan Geological Survey at Western Michigan University and the reason why our geologists who work with that facility were recently able to identify a mineral deposit in Michigan that could lead to creation of a $65 billion industry.

During these three eras, people across our campus stepped up and embraced a new idea and the demands of change even at times when it did not seem like the ideal time to do so. They embraced opportunity rather than remain too comfortable or too cautious. They chose to be bold even when conditions were not perfectly conducive to the goal. They clearly ascribed to the philosophy expressed by Marion Blakey, CEO of the Aerospace Industries Association and former chief of the FAA. She once said: "You can't leave a footprint that lasts if you're always walking on tiptoe."

One thing is certain. Western Michigan University's strengths and periods of greatest success came when the campus came together to identify needed change and then embraced that change.

We're at such a point in our history now. It's our turn to step outside our comfort zone and emulate those who came before us.

**The Year Ahead**

When we gather here next year to reflect on the State of the University, Western Michigan University will be a fundamentally changed organization.

When we gather here at the Dalton Center in fall 2014 and we review our achievements:

- We'll be talking about the Western Michigan University School of Medicine and its first class of 50 medical students, selected from among some 3,000 applicants. Those students will be deep into their studies in a curriculum designed for the 21st century. And the staff and faculty of that private school within this public university will be part of the WMU extended family.
At this time next year, we should have an affiliate law program with the Thomas M. Cooley Law School. A new group of students, faculty and staff will become part of our extended community. If all goes well, and our accrediting bodies approve, we could even be offering a limited number of law classes here on campus by 2014.

We will, depending on our trustees' approval, be a "tobacco-free" campus by this time next year. It's a move that is really a logical extension of our commitment to building a healthy and sustainable campus. It will involve personal challenges, and we will be prepared to help members of our community address those personal challenges.

At this time next year, we will likely be even more diverse in every sense of the term. Our enrollment of underrepresented minority students has been steadily growing—up some 80 percent, or more than 2000 students, in the past decade. Our international enrollment will continue to grow as we refine burgeoning relationships with the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and other nations around the globe.

By next fall, we'll be reflecting on our progress toward creating a series of campus "neighborhoods" that reflect the unique character of different areas of our campus and are tailored to the residential needs and service levels desired by our students.

In October 2014, the top of Prospect Hill will be in the middle of a transformation, and East Hall will be under construction and headed back to being the active part of campus life it once was and will be again.

And when we talk about our role as a research university, we'll be discussing a new series of interdisciplinary areas of focus designed to leverage unique combinations of faculty expertise and interest. When we meet again next year there will be at WMU national interdisciplinary research centers for excellence with multi-million dollar external support.

Just last week, we learned that our University will be home to a Transportation Research Center for Livable Communities, funded with a $1.4 million grant for the first year and the prospect of future support. The center taps the expertise of our faculty in engineering, geography, psychology and blindness and low vision studies. Ours is the lead university on a five-university national collaboration and our award is one of an unprecedented three such awards made in Michigan. States are usually happy to receive one. Michigan has three, with the other centers on different topics being established at Michigan State University and University of Michigan-Arbor.

Those items, and more, represent a period of massive change for our University—changes that have been fostered and nurtured by personnel throughout the University. It is massive and visible change, and it will be tempting to sit back and enjoy our enhanced profile. But we have too much more work to do, and some of it will be both difficult and not as easily or immediately visible.

The changes we need to make include items that will help us extend our traditions and leverage our commitment to our strategic pillars and goals.

We must boost our online and off-campus offerings and re-examine all of our delivery options to use as we reach out to populations in this nation and around the globe who need access to the talent and expertise that exists on this campus. My interactions at home and abroad over the past months have only reinforced that priority. We are a recognized national and international university with great programs and talented faculty, but our reach—our ability to deliver—is too limited.
We need to modify our inventory of program offerings and re-envision how some fit into our academic structure. That begins with a regular review of every program on a regularly scheduled cycle. That is simply a good practice at every level of our academic community.

Our commitment is to build a diverse campus—an environment where all people regardless of their role or status in life know that WMU is the place where everyone counts. That must continue to be enhanced. Equally important is our commitment to sustainability. It must continue and find new avenues. In both cases, we must look at the goals of diversity and sustainability in the very broadest definition of the terms. The waste of humanity, physical structure or fiscal resources is a terrible thing!

I've outlined very visible change today as well as change that is more systemic and quiet—but every bit as important. None of the change outlined was conceived as a criticism of the status quo. That's the important thing to remember about change. It is not about where you've been. It's about where you're going, and we have places to go.

In closing, I'd like to share this quote from Socrates: "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new."

We're honoring the old through our traditions and by focusing our energy on enhancing and strengthening this great University. Thank you for everything you do to make this a place of both tradition and change. I'm already looking forward to seeing you here next year. And thank you for the support and personal warmth that you have extended to me. And, yes, it’s a GREAT DAY TO BE A BRONCO!