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State of the University (October 2014)

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State of the University 2014

Good afternoon honorees, guests, community members, students, faculty and staff members. I'm very pleased you're here with us today.

Academic Convocation is a time to celebrate our identity as an academic institution. It is a time to honor what we do best and focus our praise on those individuals who excel in representing our mission, vision and values. I would like us all to join in one more sustained round of applause for the 11 people we've honored today, for those we have honored in the past and for those who aspire to and act in a way that will see them receive one of these campuswide awards in the future. Thank you all for your service every day.

My mission today is to tell you about the state of our University. The litany of accomplishments and examples of commitment you've heard during this convocation should leave little doubt as to what my assessment will be.

State of the University

The state of Western Michigan University is one that offers incredible opportunity and substantial challenge, and will result in growing and measurable rewards for our campus, community, state and nation. We are positioned for a future that few universities will have the opportunity to realize.
The year in review—what we've accomplished

I'd like to begin with a story that illustrates what we've accomplished recently to bring us to this point.

A few weeks ago, several of the members of the WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine inaugural class were having dinner in a downtown Kalamazoo restaurant. I can imagine it was a lively group, and the young people attracted some attention. They struck up a conversation with their waitress, who asked them what brought them to town. Their reply was a simple one. "We're students at the new medical school," they said. At that point the startled young people—the WMU students—were treated to an ovation by the rest of the patrons in the restaurant. It was marvelous because they got it.

That moment is reflective of what this community, this University and all of you have accomplished. It required being bold and brave enough to usher in change for our University and the Kalamazoo community. But we must not stop being bold and brave with this accomplishment.

Just over a year ago, I stood at this podium and told you that by today, Western Michigan University would be a fundamentally changed institution. I was not being prescient, but rather reflecting the reality I knew was coming. We, you, all of us were on the verge of completing work that had begun years earlier. My forecast last year was an informed one. That forecast has unfolded as expected. And the impact has already begun. Consider for a moment a brief account of some of those changes.

- The past year has seen us move from a comprehensive research university to one of only 90 universities in the nation with both a medical school and a law school under its aegis and the opportunity to offer legal and medical education to its students now and for many years to come. The Western Michigan University name is now firmly attached to the Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine as well as the Thomas M. Cooley Law School. Those affiliations have come with new physical resources in our home community and in four other communities—one of them in Florida.

- From a respected national research university, we have become one that also attracts, as it has in the past four weeks, visits by such luminaries as the head of the National Institutes of Health, a director from the Food and Drug Administration and the chair of the board of directors for the Association of American Medical Colleges.

- From a University known statewide for its outstanding efforts and results in the area of sustainability, we have moved to being one honored, as we were last week in Boston, with a national "Climate Leadership Award" We were one of two research universities so honored, and the award came from the nation's leading
collegiate climate action organization, the very credible Second Nature. They got it right.

- We have moved with determination, over the past year, into the position that puts us among the 25 percent of colleges and universities nationwide that have made the health and well being of the campus community a priority by making the campus tobacco free.

- And finally, we have changed the sad reality of having our East Campus unused, unusable and subjected to the ravages of time. Today, we are bringing that campus back to life and planning its emergence once again as a focal point to honor our legacy and our partnership with our community. At this time next year East Hall will be an active part of our campus, and we're all going to love it. You have my word on that.

Over the past 12 months, we have achieved the changes I just described because so many on this campus and in this community—you—have come together to push our goals forward. But before we look for a flightsuit and an aircraft carrier to use in a "Mission Accomplished" moment, I must caution that there is much, much more to do. This year of change has set a pattern of momentum that we need to leverage. Now is not the time to rest on our laurels.

All of these accomplishments were achieved for one reason. We were bold and brave enough to change and sure of the vision before us. We knew where our learner-centered, discovery-driven and globally engaged university needed to go next. I believe that we have set the standard for the future. When we gather here next year—and the year after—I expect to stand at this podium and celebrate with you the successful completion of even more initiatives that will keep us moving toward a future that is rich with promise.

**Our reputation is growing**

Our work is already producing results. As I travel around the country, I get constant indications that people know and admire what is happening here. And this year, I believe that awareness is leading to changes in how we’re viewed by some well known collegiate ranking systems.

My favorite assessment, for example, comes from Washington Monthly magazine which assesses universities on the good they are doing for students and the nation when it comes to producing Ph.Ds. and new knowledge, encouraging service and adding value and success to the lives of individual students. They get it. That value-added quality and commitment to the larger community have long been our hallmarks. This is the second year WMU has appeared on Washington Monthly's list of top-100 national universities and its second appearance in the magazine's more recent "best bang for the buck" category.
They got it right. We're a value-added institution. We're an opportunity university. We roll up our sleeves, and we get the job done here, thanks to you and the good work you do.

And even the grandfather of college ranking systems—U.S. News & World Report—has altered its measurement criteria over the past two years to reflect outcomes—our specialty. I don't think it's a coincidence that for two years in a row, our standing in that publication's ranking has improved from its already strong position as a national university.

Outcomes, opportunity, commitment to student success and impact on society—these are our hallmarks, and this is the WMU identity that will continue to carry us forward.

**Broad initiatives are underway**

New academic programs and facilities, successful collaborations and an ever-increasing profile are critically important to the University. By their nature, they are very visible. Every bit as important, but sometimes less visible is our ongoing commitment to the student experience—to modeling for our students the kind of citizens we want them to become and addressing the concerns that speak directly to their ability to succeed and thrive.

Two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar at the Lee Honors College that explored the past year's work by students, faculty and staff in 14 projects funded by an unusual grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The foundation's Racial Healing Planning Grant, awarded last year, has funded work that ranges from reducing healthcare inequities in the community to boosting family involvement in school readiness and using music and occupational therapy to improve outcomes for infants exposed in utero to opiates. Hundreds of members of our campus community have been involved in efforts that have already helped change thousands of lives. It is an opportunity for campus experts to lead by example and provide the foundation for our students to experience the satisfaction of making a real difference, and doing it now, while they're students here at a great university.

In a completely different vein but, again, critical to the student experience is an effort that began this summer as leaders in multiple areas of this University began to look at the issue of sexual assault and whether we, as a campus, were doing enough to create a safe environment and one that allows students to voice their concerns, be heard and be safe.

We wanted to examine all of our processes and procedures for reporting incidents, handling reports of assault or harassment, and building an environment that meets our expectations of ourselves and aligns with the expectations of state and federal
agencies. To that end, we have been examining all of our efforts in this arena. Then we worked with some national experts to help us determine if and where there was need for improvement. We've carefully looked at everything we do and determined some changes to our structure and processes that are still being refined.

But as we learned last year when we did the Campus Climate Survey, going deep into our campus culture and hearing honestly expressed views from those most concerned or affected sometimes takes extraordinary measures. For that reason, we will be initiating a process that will allow respondents to report their views and experiences anonymously to an off-campus entity. And only then, will we truly be able to say we've examined the issue as thoroughly as that issue deserves. Stay tuned. There will be much more to share. But I want you to know, the task is at hand. We are taking it more seriously, and we are working very, very hard.

**Challenges and opportunities are our future**

There are issues we'll face over the coming months that fall squarely into the description of being both challenges and opportunities. A few weeks ago, when we celebrated the grand opening of the Western Michigan Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine, those attending had the opportunity to watch video comments from our major donors, indeed, one of the highlights of the ceremony. Several of those comments will stay in my memory for a long time. One in particular both celebrated what we've accomplished and reflects the nature and the promise of the challenges we now have before us.

**Trustee Bill Johnston** rightly reveled in the opening of the medical school, a moment that Ronda Stryker and he made possible. He predicted that 20 years from now the real impact of the medical school on the community would be understood, and he said, we would be asking ourselves why we didn't do this sooner. He's right. All the raw materials have been in place for many years, in this community, this region and, certainly, at this University, but it took an effort to build a community consensus, the courage to change and a lot of work to make the medical school a reality.

So many of our opportunities fit into that same category. There are initiatives and needs for which all the ingredients are in place, we have only to act with speed, energy and commitment to use those ingredients for desired outcomes. They are areas in which we will accomplish our goals, do enormous good for our institution and then wonder why we didn't use such measures earlier. I would put four initiatives or areas of focus among the items for which we have the ingredients to accomplish all we want to do—and more.

**Enrollment**

As you all know, our enrollment report this fall showed we have been making important gains in strategic areas, but this fall, we are slightly below where we want to be to operate at maximum efficiency.
Our student body this year is more diverse and substantially more international, with 5 and 10 percent enrollment increases, respectively, in those areas. We're happy about that—delighted. Our student body also includes more transfer students, more honors students and more graduate students working on doctoral degrees.

Our incoming freshman class credentials have continued to increase in quality each year—and this year was no exception. Our typical incoming freshman now has a 3.41 high school GPA and a composite ACT score of 22.8.

Campuswide efforts to help first-year students succeed and return for the second year of their studies at this great University paid off in a spectacular fashion this fall, as our freshman-to-sophomore retention rate increased by nearly four (3.8) percentage points—an increase the size of which is rarely seen by any school in a single year. That happened because we made retention the responsibility of every member of our campus community. And you responded. Thank you, for your efforts to reach out and to help our students access the resources they need to find success. Thank you very much for doing so. It is a collaborative—a team effort.

Still, even with all those significant gains, our overall traditional enrollment is down slightly. I say that recognizing that this number does not include the hundreds of students that are part of the new entities under the Western Michigan University umbrella. We need to make sure we use all of our resources and all of the opportunity and amenities we can offer as we recruit from our traditional base of undergraduate students. We want to ensure WMU is their first and final enrollment choice. The resources and initiatives we need are in place. In fact we have, with our newest initiatives, expanded the breadth of academic programming we offer in important ways. That is what great universities should do. But, it is now up to each of us to engage prospective students with information about new programs and amenities, as well as promote the promise that is inherent in our affiliations with our new medical and law schools. In short, student recruitment must, like retention, become the goal of every individual at WMU.

**Program review**

An academic program review is underway and it will help ensure that our academic offerings are in sync with, and have the quality required to best serve, our students. I am grateful to those faculty members and administrators who are playing key roles in this important effort that will allow us to plan and use our resources effectively.

Closely related to the assessment of our program offerings is the concern that we must be cautious about relying on the metrics too many agencies, governmental entities and organizations use today to judge quality and make decisions about funding. Those metrics in our state and across the nation often narrowly focus on the STEM disciplines—science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The STEM disciplines are certainly important, and we do that extremely well and we produce a
large number of graduates with STEM degrees. But we are so much more than a STEM institution, and it is our responsibility to advocate for the disciplines that make the university experience transformational.

The humanities and the social sciences include the disciplines that lead to the critical thinking skills and flexibility that transform young people into productive citizens. Our ability to transform lives is firmly in place. We must speak with the courage and expertise we have built as educators and counter the voices that are far too narrow in their assessment of academic disciplines and how they perceive those academic disciplines and their contributions to society. We simply have to call people on that to help them understand the nature of the university. We need to be proud of our offerings and the contributions they make not only to the welfare of students but also to the economy as a whole.

**General Education revision**

A Faculty Senate-driven initiative has begun in recent months to review WMU’s general education program and potential revisions to it.

A three-year action plan to review and develop recommendations for reforming the University’s general education program grew out of an ad hoc committee’s work with the campus community and with the help of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Institute on General Education and Assessment. I endorse the work and am grateful to those members of the ad hoc committee who have initiated it. As the next three years unfold, I urge our campus community to remember that Western Michigan University’s general education tradition is one upon which we want to build and its reputation is one that we should leverage.

Earlier revisions to our general education program put us on the leading edge of undergraduate education. One iteration in 1964 made this the first university in the nation to require at least one course of study on the nonwestern world. And another revision in the early 1980s made us the first university in the United States to require computer literacy of every graduate. **We were the first university in the nation** to recognize and act upon the idea that computers would become critical in the lives of all students. We were bold and brave enough to change before. I think we can be bold and brave enough to change again.

The opportunity is there, looking us right in the eye. And I think with the good work and the good intellect on this University campus, we can make that happen.

**Reinvigoration of research agenda**

One area of challenge and opportunity we are meeting head on is our research expenditures. We are working hard to ensure that the resources and talent that are part of WMU are configured in a way that finds success in the current funding
environment. Over the past few years and while federal funding was making a slow recovery from recessionary levels, our research officers have been slowly building collaborative centers for excellence and discovery communities. Their work has, again, focused on the fact that many of the resources we need are already here on campus. This is once again a question of being bold and willing to set aside disciplinary silos in a way that allows us to build stronger research teams and leverage our areas of expertise.

Just last week we saw the results of the thoughtful assembly of such research talent from across our university. Some 40 faculty and staff came together to develop a competitive research proposal that resulted in a $3.2 million award from the U.S. Department of Education. They will use the unique opportunities afforded by the existence of the Kalamazoo Promise to build an institutional culture focused on increased access and degree completion for underrepresented, underprepared or low-income students. The award, which was made through the Department of Education's new “First in the World” initiative, is the first in Michigan and the only such award made in this state. Out of some 500 proposals submitted nationally, only 24 were funded.

Similarly, a collaborative, interdisciplinary research team built our Transportation Research Center for Livable Communities that won a $1.4 million award from the U.S. Department of Transportation last year and was recently refunded for another year with an additional $1.4 million. That center employs the expertise of such disparate disciplines as civil engineering, geography, blindness and low vision studies, psychology, special education and computer science.

The assembly of such research centers and discovery communities is now beginning to bring additional funding. In September alone, some $15 million in external funding was received for this kind of collaborative research. Again, it's not time to sit back and simply celebrate—although celebration is in order. It's time to keep that kind of momentum going.

**In closing**

I'll close with a good recent example of what happens when we do everything right and maximize the use of our resources and abilities. Our students benefit, our communities benefit and our university adds points of pride.

In 2005, after a decade of work, **Dr. John Patten**, director of WMU's Manufacturing Research Center, patented a revolutionary piece of technology that uses a hybrid laser-diamond cutting tool to make it easier to machine brittle materials like ceramics and semiconductors. Further research, testing and development were done, with Dr. Patten working with a handful of undergraduate and graduate students from around the world.
In 2011, Dr. Patten and Dr. Deepak Ravindra, who was then a WMU doctoral candidate from Malaysia, formed a company called Micro-LAM Technologies. The company attracted attention and funding from the National Science Foundation because of its promise in the manufacturing realm. That young company is now firmly established with an office in Kalamazoo and a manufacturing site in Battle Creek. What Drs. Patten and Ravindra fondly refer to as their "cutting edge" technology has gained worldwide attention.

Fast forward to this summer. The Micro-LAM technology is the basis for a new industrial tool capable of drilling brittle, non-metal material. It holds promise in five broad industry sectors. That new tool is now the subject of a new National Science Foundation award to support a collaboration involving Drs. Patten and Ravindra, a new doctoral assistant, entrepreneurial engineering specialist Dr. Steven Butt and Dr. John Mueller, management professor from the Haworth College of Business. Together, they'll work on a business plan for the commercialization of the new tool, while a talented young management undergraduate, Alexa DeVos, researches industry contacts and helps prioritize the commercialization rollout by industry sector.

If you're keeping track, you will have identified one terrific idea, faculty members from two different disciplines, plus international and domestic students at the undergraduate and graduate levels successfully working with federal funding to introduce technology that will make the lives of manufacturers in Michigan and around the world better. And at least one local company with six employees has already resulted from their work.

That's what happens when all goes as it could and as it should. Our next transformation must be to make such developments more common. There is certainly so much more we can do—and I'm looking forward to working with you to get it done.

That brings me to one closing point. I understand from varying reports that there are some people across the campus and in the community who are pretty sure that now that the medical and law schools are a reality, Dunn is done—ready for retirement.

Am I going to retire? I am. Absolutely—just not in the foreseeable future. Linda and I are happy here, and there are so many great things in the community and the region that we cherish. I still want to work with you and with your support there is so much more to accomplish. I pledge to continue to work with you and to do my part to not only lead, but to listen and support. And so I guess, finally what I'm trying to say is that at least for now, Dunn is not done.

I want to thank you for your time and attention and hey, is this a great day to be a Bronco? Thank you very much.