President's Perspective (September 2015)

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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Dear Colleagues:

We're off and running in what has been a high-profile start to the school year. The weeks leading up to the fall kickoff have been enjoyable. Today, however, marks the start of a new academic year and the fundamental work of the University. Welcome to the 2015-16 academic year.

FOOTBALL SEASON KICKOFF

Friday night's Bronco football home opener was a wonderful communitywide celebration, and I want to thank everyone on campus—literally hundreds of people—who have worked hard for weeks and months to make sure Western Michigan University put its best foot forward, offering a welcoming, well-organized and creative environment for more than 30,000 of our fans and visitors from around the state and nation. The lasting favorable impression people took away from Waldo Stadium goes far beyond the athletic arena and spills over into every part of our operation. I could not be more proud of how WMU rose to the opportunity. Thank you.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS OF THE WMU COMMUNITY

Over the past two weeks, we've been welcoming new campus community members—new faculty members and, of course, new students. We're excited to have 39 new tenure-track faculty members this fall and a number of new adjunct and part-time instructors. I was fortunate to spend some time with both groups during their orientations. They bring enthusiasm, excitement and a real sense of joy and dedication. Please reach out to them, offer a personal welcome and do everything you can to make their transition to WMU a smooth one.

It will be several days before we have our official fall enrollment numbers to report, but I do want to share one piece of enrollment news. The positive outcome of the work so many of you have undertaken is our steadily climbing freshman-to-sophomore retention rate. Your efforts to welcome students and ensure they are successful means our new retention rate is nearly 80 percent—79.3 percent to be precise. That's good news for the University and great news for our students.

I think you'll find our campus continues to grow in its commitment to diversity and inclusion as well. This fall, for the first time, we've implemented a preferred name option for students, faculty and staff. The option will have wide appeal, and it's the responsible thing to do. We expect those exercising the option to range from international students who want to spend their WMU experience with an Americanized first name to those who wish to choose a gender specific or gender neutral name. I urge you to respect and use the name choices students make. It's just one additional way we can welcome a diverse population to our community.
 BUILDING ON THE PAST YEAR OF CHANGE

Last year as we entered the academic year, we were in the midst of great change. The new Stryker Medical School had just opened, we had just affiliated with what is now WMU Cooley Law School, work had just gotten underway on our new alumni center and several research and service initiatives were moving steadily along. This year will be one of accomplishment sparked partly by those initiatives. Here are a few results of the change we underwent last year:

- The medical school just welcomed its second class—60 students from 12 states who represent 39 colleges and universities around the nation. Two are WMU alumni recruited through the preferred relationship status WMU students enjoy.
- We're working closely to integrate WMU and Cooley resources to enhance both schools' offerings to students, while Cooley is carving out a national presence in student legal competitions and initiatives like its Innocence Project.
- The WMU Alumni Center in the newly renamed Heritage Hall is just weeks from its Oct. 23-25 grand opening. It will provide a new resource for both the campus and the Kalamazoo community.
- Our Autism Center for Excellence, which had just received $4 million in state funding at this time last year, will welcome Lt. Gov. Brian Calley soon to open an important new resource for young people with autism. Western's Evaluation Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental disorders—known as WECAN—will offer diagnosis and individualized treatment plans.
- Two years of work and planning by our flexible printing and electronic sensor experts, Dr. Margaret Joyce and Dr. Massood Atashbar in engineering, will result this fall in WMU becoming one of a handful of centers around the nation that are a critical part of a new $171 million manufacturing initiative for both consumers and the military that was announced at the end of August by the Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter.
- New institutional partnerships with colleges and universities in the Dominican Republic and Turkey have come to fruition over the summer after months of planning and negotiation. New international students and new global opportunities for WMU faculty and students will result.

Meanwhile, initiatives are just getting underway this year that will be among the accomplishments we're celebrating next year. Long, careful and thoughtful strategic planning matched with our ability to seize opportunity when it is presented will continue to characterize what we do to build and enhance the service and resources we offer the state and nation. Be sure to attend Academic Convocation on Friday, Oct. 2, to hear more about planning and the initiatives that will mark our future.

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY

We look forward and plan for our future, but we also need to look back and honor our beginnings. This semester will offer opportunities to put a spotlight on the close ties between WMU and its home community as well as the broader communities we serve.
Heritage Hall opening

Last weekend's festivities—which had an enormous amount of community support and enthusiasm—were a prelude to the communitywide celebration that will take place homecoming weekend, when we mark the 112th anniversary of a commitment by this community that led to the creation of what is now Western Michigan University. Some cities were created by their universities. In our case, this city created its university. We are a significant part of the legacy of the community that calls itself "the education city."

On Oct. 23-25, Prospect Hill and the building that was our birthplace—Heritage Hall—will rejoin the community as a resource that serves Kalamazoo and its University. Please mark your calendars now to be part of the opening weekend, building tours and celebration. You'll be in good company.

Geosciences 50th anniversary celebration

Over the 112 years since WMU was created, we've developed some powerhouse academic specialties. One of them—the Department of Geosciences—will celebrate its 50th anniversary of scholarship and service this fall. It will be another opportunity to recognize this University's longtime impact on its home community and beyond.

The weekend of Sept. 18-20 will launch a year-long series of events devoted to honoring the path and the individuals who made the Department of Geosciences what it is today—home to a host of services that catalogue and protect Michigan's environment, solve international challenges and prepare professionals for leadership roles around the nation. Again, mark your calendars and be on the lookout for the details about how to hear alumni professionals speak about their work and the challenges to come.

FACULTY AND STUDENT ACCOLADES

We may just be starting our academic year, but the work of our scholars goes on nonstop every day of the year. Over the summer, a number of accolades have been announced. Here are just two good examples.

Association for Writers and Writing Programs’ Donald Hall Prize for Poetry

Creative writing Ph.D. student and writing instructor Iliana Rocha has won the Association for Writers and Writing Programs’ Donald Hall Prize for Poetry. As part of the prize, her first collection of poems, "Karankawa," has been published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

This prestigious prize that attracts entries from established poets is a significant coup for a young poet offering her first collection for publication.
Independent Book Publishers Award

Dr. Brian C. Wilson, professor of comparative religion, has just won the 2015 Independent Book Publishers Award—the IPPY—for his biography of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and account of Battle Creek's health and wellness history. Brian captured the IPPY silver medal in the biography category.

Gala events that mark the beginning of new periods of service and scholarship, as well as individual accolades for members of the University community will be the highlights of the next few months. I look forward to sharing the celebrations with you and having the chance to congratulate our students and faculty members for their honors. Thank you for all you do every day to make our University one that adds value to our communities and our students' lives.

Continuing best,

John M. Dunn
President