

Wayne State University Address
President M. Roy Wilson
Sept. 12, 2014

Good morning, everybody. I want to thank all of you for being here. I want to acknowledge the chair of the Board of Governors for being here, Debbie Dingell – who’s here. Thank you.

I’d like to also acknowledge another special guest who has joined us today. This man is a Wayne State alumnus who we are happy to see on campus from time to time. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree at our 2013 commencement ceremony. Most importantly, he exemplifies many of the qualities of Wayne State students and alumni: talent, creativity, hard work, persistence, and success.

If you watched the Oscar-winning documentary “Searching for Sugar Man,” this man needs no introduction. Please give a warm welcome to Rodriguez.

I’m thrilled that the fall semester has started. There is a vibrancy around campus, which may have been present last year, but I just don’t remember it as being quite the same. After a year here, I feel that I’ve become very familiar with Wayne State, with Detroit, and with Michigan.

Some you know that I’m an avid cyclist, and Jacqueline and I have had an opportunity to explore much of Michigan this summer through cycling. Almost every weekend this summer, if we did not have out of town obligations, we would participate in a sponsored ride somewhere in Michigan and had an opportunity to see parts of Michigan which we may not have otherwise visited—Grand Haven, Grand Rapids, St. Clair, Chelsea, Swartz Creek, parts of Canada, and yes, of course, even parts of Detroit.

There is no better way of understanding a state than visiting different parts of the state and interacting with people of all ages, different socioeconomic status, different perspectives—people with whom you are simply another cyclist and not president of Wayne State. Not only is it a lot of fun, but it is also a great learning experience and I always come away with an enhanced perspective of the region.

And there is no better way of gaining an understanding of a city than living right in the middle of it, and of understanding a university than living on campus. Jacqueline and I have enjoyed being a part of campus and of our midtown neighborhood.

Paris has the Eiffel Tower, London has Big Ben, New York City the Statue of Liberty, and San Francisco the Golden Gate Bridge. But no structure or symbol—not even the Great Wall of China--better personifies the spirit and soul of an entire country

than does Mount Fuji in Japan. As many of you know, Japan is my birthplace, so it was of special—even spiritual—significance for me to be able to climb to the summit of Mt. Fuji to experience the sunrise there this summer. Jacqueline and my daughter, Presley, joined me though I think they would describe the arduous climb in the dark of night and the entire experience in quite different terms. In fact, just to show you that we all made the summit in time for sunrise, here we are—Jacqueline, my daughter Presley, and me.

I mention this because as Mount Fuji symbolizes the spirit and soul of Japan, I've been pondering a lot about the spirit and soul of Wayne State University. Think about it and I will come back to it later.

Since this is a “university address,” I should spend a few moments discussing where I think we are with regard to our vision of being among the pre-eminent public urban research universities of the nation and share a few thoughts on what I think needs to be done to achieve that vision.

I remain excited and optimistic. But also, I do think we are at a “tipping point.” And if you object to that expression because it is so over-used, think of it as a watershed moment instead—broadly defined as a critical dividing line or change of course, a transition—whether for the positive or the negative.

Let's look at several specific areas:

- 1) Enrollment: Our Board of Governors has appropriately been laser-focused on our enrollment. On the positive side, our first-time freshmen enrollment is up 1.4% and transfer students are up 2% from last year. Our international enrollment is also up, and growing. In total, we welcomed 7096 new students to campus this fall, an increase of 8% over last fall. But—we experienced a decrease in **overall** enrollment as a result of a decrease in our continuing student numbers. How can that be? There are a number of reasons—part of it is the consequence of having lower numbers of incoming freshman and graduate students several years ago. There is not much we can do about that at this point. But there are also financial, family, work, and academic reasons, and we can help them with some of these issues. To break down barriers, to facilitate their success. To help them graduate.

Michigan is well served by its 15 public universities. But the demographics of the state are changing and the projected numbers of college-aged kids is going to be smaller. Of this smaller number, those who are college ready will have many options for higher education. That means we've got to convince prospective students that Wayne State is where they should pursue their education rather than somewhere else; once here, we've got to make sure they have positive experiences, feel supported, and desire to stay here to complete their education.

In order to do that, we must deliver a better product and better services at a better value.

This is a watershed moment for us. Have we turned the corner on declining enrollments or are the improved numbers, at least in relation to the first-time freshmen, a temporary blip in an otherwise downward spiral? I believe we have turned the corner, and I assure you that the Board of Governors and my administration will continue to work diligently to sustain an upward trajectory. But each and every one of you also matter and can influence whether or not students preferentially select Wayne State to pursue their college education, and decide to persist on through graduation at Wayne State.

In truth we are going to lose a certain segment of the prospective student population to the University of Michigan and even Michigan State. They're both outstanding institutions, and I have great respect for the role each play in higher education locally and nationally. But those students represent a small group. Through outstanding teaching, an innovative curriculum, internship and research opportunities that not all universities can offer, a campus that is clean, safe, and attractive, and brimming with vibrancy, let's commit—let's all of us commit--to making Wayne State the university of choice for the large, remaining segment of the prospective student population.

- 2) Student Success: We have an opportunity to make some huge gains in this area. Over the past three years, 38 new academic advisors have been hired and other resources have been allocated. Preliminary data on retention and graduation trends are encouraging. For 2014, we expect that our 6-year graduation rate for first-time college students will have increased 7 percentage points in just three years. We expect this rate to be 33%, up from 26% in 2011. Our 5-year graduation rate is expected to have increased nearly 4 percentage points over the past three years. Also, we expect that our retention into the third year and into the fourth year will have increased by more than 7 percentage points each since 2011. We are thus well positioned to continue to improve our six-year graduation rates over the next few years.

But there are significant challenges. One of the major barriers to students being able to persist and complete their degree is the financial distress many of them experience. We have some limited resources to assist such students in financial need to succeed, most notably the generous scholarship program of Bill Berman, called "Crossing the Finish Line" and the HIGH (Helping Individuals Go Higher) Program that Jacqueline has initiated. Unfortunately, the need is great, much greater than I had anticipated, and the available resources are overwhelmed by the need.

Perhaps the most joyful moment that both Jacqueline and I have experienced at Wayne State was at commencement this past May and seeing several students cross the stage that would not have done so had it not been for some financial assistance provided them. The moment of truth came for me, and for Jacqueline, when a certain student came to our attention last fall. It was the first student we helped. Let me tell you her story.

Her name is Khari. A great student. A 3.6 grade point average. A senior. Progressing well. Kinesiology major and she needed to take an internship at Henry Ford Hospital in the winter semester in order to graduate. In order to take that internship she needed to take a pre-requisite course. Unfortunately that course was not offered in the fall semester, so she took it in the summer. In the fall, she had a bill for the fall semester and the summer semester, which was not paid for by some Financial Aid. And her registration was held up for the winter semester until her balance was paid up front. That was a little over \$1,000. We were able to help her out and she was able to cross the stage at commencement this past May.

This story is illustrative in two ways. First, given our mission of access and opportunity for students of all socioeconomic profiles and life circumstances, student success—as measured by the six year graduation rate—will continue to be more of a challenge for WSU than for almost all of our peer group of national universities with very high research activity. The sad truth is that the students we are able to help represent just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

But the second issue though is that students who do everything right—take the courses they are supposed to take, get good grades, are motivated to finish-- should have an expectation to graduate on time. I do not know the specifics of why the course she needed wasn't offered in the fall semester. But I do know that every student who matriculates at our university, and does everything they are supposed to do, should be provided a clear pathway to graduate in four years. That is our responsibility, we owe our students that, and we owe the parents of our students that, also.

Looking into the future, both enrollment and student success have more impact on our funding than any other factors except tuition increases which, of course, we must moderate. Nationally, consideration will likely be given to **NOT** penalize universities that accept and educate “at risk” (i.e. typically low income) students in President Obama’s proposed university ranking system (incidentally, how universities rank in this system will determine how much federal financial aid will be allocated to these universities). Although we will make the argument

to do so at the state level, I am not optimistic that the state metric on six year graduation rate will change appreciably. The reality is that how we perform over the coming years in improving student success will significantly impact our budget.

Yet, despite the challenges, there is good reason for optimism. I mentioned earlier our positive trends. Several universities, with similar student profiles to ours, have experienced substantial gains in their 6-year graduation rates over a five- to eight-year time-frame. We are learning from these universities. And we have a devoted partner in the Kresge Foundation. A generous grant from the Foundation is allowing us to implement many of the strategies used by these successful universities. I would like to publicly thank the Kresge Foundation for this very important support.

- 3) Research: Our research funding has experienced a downward trajectory over the past decade. In fact, some of you may have seen the NPR Health News article a couple of days ago in which Wayne State was mentioned, along with nine others, as institutions that have experienced notable declines in NIH funding over the past decade. So far, year-to-date, we are noting an increase in federal research funding. And we have an opportunity to change that trajectory of the past decade with our new research building.

I purposely did not refer to the building as the MBRB because after much consultation and discussion, our vice president for research has proposed a new name for this building: The Integrative Biosciences Center (IBio). But new facilities alone will not be the answer. Too little attention has been paid to the research enterprise over many years, and we are barely hanging on to our status as a major national research university. Some of our existing research spaces—both wet and dry lab space—are not in acceptable condition.

Over this past year, we've put a big dent in addressing this problem in the College of Engineering where several laboratories are being renovated. We will need even more extensive upgrades in the Scott Building of the School of Medicine. If the Integrative Biosciences Center simply becomes replacement for currently non-functional or undesirable research space, our research enterprise will not advance. Rather, we must have new and more research, more large center-grant type research, and more programmatic research that directly impacts the urban, health disparity populations we serve. We have very capable faculty, and we must provide them the environment and the resources to be maximally productive.

As importantly, we must examine long-standing policies and practices that do not optimally incentivize research, particularly theme-based and programmatic research. A faculty group is currently reviewing such policies and practices and recommendations for change will be forthcoming soon.

Make no mistake about it: we have significant challenges, not the least of which is limited funds to recruit additional investigators.

Research thus represents a watershed moment for us. But I am confident that we have the right leadership in place, that we have begun to address our infrastructure needs, and that we will ultimately implement policies and practices to advance our research objectives. It won't be easy but I am confident that our trajectory in research will be upward.

- 4) Finally, I'm going to touch on a topic that many of you may wonder why I would consider it a watershed: and that is the Humanities and Arts. This is not solely a Wayne State issue, but rather a state and national issue. Both the nation and state of Michigan, as well as many other states, are focused on STEM education. I understand that focus.

The nation needs more graduates in the STEM disciplines in order to maintain our global leadership position in science and technology. For states such as Michigan, graduating more students in the STEM disciplines is a strategic necessity for fulfilling workforce demands and for economic development. In fact, in Michigan, the performance metrics--upon which state funding for higher education is based--includes numbers of degrees conferred in the STEM disciplines. The Humanities and Arts are becoming an afterthought. Even the president of the United States made comments that were denigrating to art history majors in his last State of the Union speech. I believe that to be short-sighted.

I'm often asked why--as a medical scientist and researcher--I am such an advocate for the Humanities and Arts. I'll share a personal story that may shed some light on my perspective. And it's not a story I tell very often.

I didn't particularly like my undergraduate experience, at least the first few years of it. The reasons had nothing to do with academics or the faculty, many of whom I had developed very close relationships. It had to do with the social climate.

I went to school with just 1,800 students and less than 40 were minorities. I remember one incident that was the moment of truth for me. It was around

Halloween – a black female student, a fellow colleague, came to me crying. She was offended because one of the fraternities was dragging a fraternity brother, with his face painted black, on a chain.

Two of my basketball buddies were in this fraternity. So, I went to them and I told them the story. And I expected a different response than what I got. The response I got was, “well, it’s Halloween isn’t it?” I decided that wasn’t the environment that I could stay in. That was sophomore year. That and other things, made me decide to leave college early.

I applied to medical school. I think I applied to three—I remember three interviews. One interview—the University of Maryland—I decided to drop. The person who interviewed me bred dogs—that was his hobby. And he was talking about minorities in a “breeding” context. And was comparing me to his well-bred hunting dogs. So I decided I was going to drop the University of Maryland. The only reason why I picked it was because Maryland was my home.

I didn’t get into Yale. But inexplicably—and this is after my second year—inexplicably, Harvard didn’t reject me. They put me on a waiting list with a very nice letter that said, we’d love for you to come but we think you should finish your undergraduate degree first. You’ll be a better doctor if you finish your undergraduate degree.

So, I knew I was in. If you know anything about medicine and pre-med, you know that it’s a very competitive pre-med curriculum. Usually in your junior year, the students are trying their best to beat each other—to take the hardest science courses—the most advanced science courses to differentiate themselves from other students. Well, I never took another science course. Having gotten assurance that I was going to be in medical school, the only courses I took from then on were in the Humanities and Arts.

I developed a love of mythology, of philosophy, art, and music—and my life has been forever enriched by experiencing and understanding these topics. A miserable college experience was transformed into one that I would now consider to be among the most rewarding of my life.

I believe firmly that leading institutions of higher education, and Wayne State specifically, must reaffirm its commitment to the Humanities and Arts.

Given our limited resources, how we respond to the assault on the Humanities and Arts will be a watershed moment. How we respond will determine whether or not we are recognized as a great university or one that is merely pedestrian. Our

commitment will likely be tested. When the time comes, I hope you will take the example of Detroit and the Detroit Institute of Arts, rise to the challenge, and declare definitively the value of the arts to our institution and to higher education more broadly.

So, where do I think we are in our vision to be one of the pre-eminent public urban research universities in the country? It's aspirational but achievable. What happens over the next two, perhaps three years, will determine the direction of our trajectory. I believe, to my core, that it will be a positive one. But we can't just sit back—we must actively influence that trajectory.

There are two major activities or initiatives that will have a profound influence on the future of Wayne State—the strategic plan and the Capital Campaign—and we need your participation in both.

Strategic plans are often over-rated. I made a decision when I first arrived that we would not undertake a strategic plan during my initial year. There were obvious areas that needed immediate focus and frankly we didn't need a strategic plan to tell us what those were. We've dealt with or are in the process of dealing with the low-hanging fruit. Now we are in a different place. The decisions on where to place limited resources are more difficult and we need a well worked out "game plan."

We began the strategic planning process in the spring and it continues today. At my direction, and with the assistance of the Barthwell Group, we have sought input from across the campus and the community; those conversations have demonstrated, once again, the passion that people have for Wayne State, and the willingness—in fact eagerness—to be part of it.

Our goal is to produce a plan that is the result of broad input, focused on our unique opportunities and challenges, adopted by the entire body of stakeholders, and oriented toward results. Most of all, we want this plan to be a living, breathing document that organizes our priorities, but also can flex and adapt to new challenges and new opportunities.

We'll provide updates on the strategic plan as we go along, but all of you have a role, and I encourage you to participate. You can start by visiting <http://wayne.edu/strategicplan> to offer your thoughts.

Our Capital Campaign publically launches on Oct. 9th with a goal to raise \$750 million by 2018, the university's 150th anniversary. Achieving our vision will require substantial resources. During this campaign, I wish to place much greater focus on our endowment. In comparison to our peer institutions, it is woefully low at about \$300 million. I recall a Detroit News article several weeks ago in which Michigan State University was discussed in relation to the other Big Ten schools. A point was being made that they were challenged by lagging their Big Ten peers in overall university endowment, endowed scholarships, and endowed faculty. Michigan State's endowment, by the way, is \$1.6 billion.

Philanthropic dollars should not be about replacing declining state support or even substitute for tuition increases. It should be for achieving grand visions that would not be possible without it, and for assuring that baseline support is available for the institution well past our tenure here. More immediate gratification might be attained by using philanthropic dollars in other ways, but increasing our endowment is the most beneficial long term strategy for our university and it is the responsible thing for us to do.

I was just speaking at a campaign event earlier this morning. And I remarked that the most important asset that will propel us to achieving our vision is the endowed faculty positions and the endowed scholarships.

October 9 is just around the corner. I urge you to participate in the campaign—both in the kick-off events and in your personal commitment. Wayne State is a special institution—I know that you feel it as I do. Let's make it a great one!

Let's get back to the question I posed earlier: what is the spirit and soul of Wayne State? If this was the type of event that invited open dialogue, I suspect that your responses would hit some common chords, and that they would resonate with some of my own thoughts.

1. A gritty, hard-working, "of the people, for the people" kind of persona is certainly palpable.
2. Wayne State historically opened its doors to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, ethnicities and that holds steadfastly true today. So this sense of acceptance and inclusiveness is pervasive.
3. Wayne State takes pride in being an integral part of the community, learning from but also contributing to its well being. This community "connectedness" is part of the DNA of Wayne State. One tangible bit of evidence of this is being one of 14 institutions in the country to receive elite designation as an Innovation &

Economic Prosperity University from its peers in the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. Wayne State received this new distinction based on its support of innovation and influence on economic prosperity in Detroit and throughout Michigan.

There are other qualities we can come up with that make Wayne State the special institution it is today. However, time is limited so I want to comment on just one. It's a value that I prize greatly and one that I mentioned in my first address to the university almost a year ago. It's kind of there in the background, not often explicitly articulated here but perhaps assumed.

I see it though when alumni recount their Wayne State experience, when I speak to faculty about their work, when students describe to me why they chose Wayne State rather than another university.

I see it in our student-athletes as they compete in their respective sports, in our campus safety officers as they patrol the campus and neighborhood, and in the keepers of our facilities and grounds.

I see it in the staff, and certainly in my own staff—people like Laurie Scarborough, Kristin Copenhaver, and Lisa Schrader—without whom I could not function.

I have come to understand that the spirit and soul of Wayne State is deeply rooted in the pursuit of Excellence.

It's there, I see it. It's just below the surface, the foundation that undergirds everything we do. Our faculty are performing extraordinary work; our athletic ranking is in the top 5% of the country among Division II institutions; we are increasingly attracting the very top high school students as the Honors College grew this past year an unprecedented 56%.

No need to keep it below the surface. Let's acknowledge and celebrate it. No excuses. No qualifiers. No apologies. As I've said previously, "we are what we are, we do what we do, and we will be second to none at what we do." In everything we do, we pursue Excellence. We strive for pre-eminence.

Let's be clear: in pursuing excellence I do not mean to imply that we are not already excellent. We are in many areas; not in all, but many. Nonetheless, it is the constant, relentless pursuit of excellence that is the foundation upon which we must build.

Let's believe. Let's pursue. Let's achieve. We have work to do! Let's roll up our sleeves, chart our own path of excellence, and let's just get it done.

I mentioned the extraordinary work of our faculty. Before I conclude, let me state that it's been my privilege to be a member of this distinguished faculty. For the first time in my career, I am no longer seeing patients, but I still publish, still lecture in my academic discipline, and still mentor future academicians. My colleagues here in the Department of Ophthalmology and in the Division of Population Health Sciences, as well as colleagues nationally and globally have provided opportunities for me to stay engaged in the Academy and I am grateful. Because of my engagement with academics, I interact with faculty throughout the country. And I would put our faculty up against that of any of our peer institutions. Again, it has been my privilege and honor to be associated with you, not only as president of this institution, but as a faculty member.

To the entire university—the staff, students, faculty, fellow administrators, the Board of Governors—as well as the broader community of which we are a part, Jacqueline and I thank you for the privilege of allowing us to serve you.

This is a watershed moment. Yet, the opportunities have never been greater for Wayne State University to reach its pinnacle of excellence; have never been greater for it to better position itself to better serve the community, both its geographic community as well as the community of higher education.

Let me return to the metaphor of a tipping point for a moment. I believe the scale is tipping favorably. But we cannot rest. We must be relentless in our focus on the student experience, in increasing our graduation rate, in our discovery of and dissemination of new knowledge, in increasing our endowment, and always, always, always—in the pursuit of excellence in everything we do.

Thank you.