

Inauguration Remarks
Western Illinois University 12th President Guiyou Huang, Ph.D.
March 31, 2022

Good afternoon and welcome to our Western Illinois University students, faculty, staff, alumni, friends, and guests; Deputy Governor Martin Torres; WIU Board of Trustees Chairman Doug Shaw, and all members of the board; Macomb Mayor Inman, Moline Mayor Rayapati; President Ken Hawkinson, President Emeritus Les Wong, fellow presidents; and delegates from colleges around the country.

Joining me today for this proud occasion are my wife Dr. Jennifer Yufeng Qian, a professor of education at Louisiana State University; son George, a senior majoring in Political Science and History at Rice University in Houston; and daughter Claire who is a sixth grader attending St. Paul School.

It is a tremendous privilege to stand before you today as Western Illinois University's 12th president. I am both humbled and honored to lead this great institution. Rich in history and steeped in tradition, Western has been transforming the lives of students for more than 120 years.

Many of our students come to us, often from families of modest means, trusting us to help them find their passions and prepare them to pursue lives of purpose.

Western has been and is a community of Leathernecks. Author and psychologist Angela Duckworth, in her book *Grit*, describes grit as a combination of passion and perseverance for an important goal. Grit is the hallmark of high achievers and thus, grit is the hallmark of WIU Leathernecks.

Students at WIU work hard in the classroom, give their best in the athletic arena, provide notable service to their communities, and make the most of their Leatherneck experience. Our students have an innate desire to succeed and to change the world, and they persevere to actualize their dreams. I have met many students since my arrival on campus last January, and they have welcomed and inspired me, and their stories make me so proud. As just a few examples:

As soon as Joni Mikesell stepped foot on campus, she quickly engaged within her residence hall and applied to be on the 2020-2021 Homecoming Committee. She volunteered with the University Union Board during COVID, and became its President for the current academic year along with being a Resident Assistant and U100 Peer Mentor. Passionate about creating programming spaces that create meaningful experiences for WIU students, Joni cares greatly about providing social and learning opportunities for her peers.

The highly motivated Vanessa Barban embraces every opportunity that comes her way, while finding a way to balance it all. She is a strong advocate for student involvement and cares deeply about others. What I admire about Vanessa is her desire to build relationships with her peers to create meaningful experiences in the organizations in which she is involved.

RockyTHON was started by a group of students who wanted to give back in ways no other student organization at WIU had done before. Over the last nine years, over 3,500 students who participated in RockyTHON have developed a passion for raising money for two Children's Miracle Network Hospitals in the Greater St. Louis Area, and they have raised close to \$800,000 to date. Not only has this program helped provide funds to countless families with sick children, it has taught WIU students the meaning of giving back and paying it forward, caring for others, teamwork, passion, and making a difference in people's lives.

Western has outstanding staff. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge just a few of them for their work to support student success, particularly over the past two years.

First, our risk management team and our nurses and health staff at Beu. Since Spring 2020, these dedicated civil servants and administrators have worked tirelessly staffing testing and vaccine clinics, and maintaining health standards and protocols, to ensure our campus' safety. Before they moved indoors, they faithfully stood in the elements to collect COVID-test samples to uphold our University community's health and well-being. They have gone above and beyond in all that they do. These individuals ensure the well-being of our students and employees, physically and emotionally, and for that, I thank you.

Our staff in the Multicultural Center are here for our underrepresented students. They work alongside students from the Gwendolyn Brooks Cultural Center, Women's Center, LGBTQA Resource Center, Casa Latina, and many other organizations to lead change and ensure a culture of inclusivity and respect.

Western has remarkable faculty. Dr. Win Phippen, School of Agriculture, was awarded a \$10 million Bio-Fuel Federal Research Grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to investigate the use of the alternative crop, Pennycress, as a new cash cover crop for the biofuel industry. The goal is to further refine Pennycress as a new winter-annual cash cover crop. Researchers from universities in four states are part of Dr. Phippen's team to refine this high-yield oilseed crop, integrating into existing corn-soybean rotations and yielding up to two billion gallons of oil annually.

The School of Law Enforcement and Justice Administration was just awarded a \$2 million federal grant for the Western Emergency Operations Center, and the Speech Pathology and Audiology department raised over \$10,000 last semester through their *Gifting A Voice* campaign to purchase communication technology for non-speaking children in regional school districts. Thanks to the donations, SPA graduate students received hands-on experience with programming devices and teaching children to utilize them. It also changed the lives of the children who now have voices and are able to communicate with their teachers, therapists and loved ones. Besides helping children in surrounding school districts, the department serves people of all ages, with over 1,800 visits to their on-campus Speech and Hearing clinic last year.

Western has outstanding alumni. Mr. Robert L. Nardelli '75, former CEO of GE Power Systems, Home Depot and Chrysler, is the Founder and CEO of XLR-8, LLC, an investment and advisory company. He has served as a Senior Advisor to SAP, Emigrant Capital Corp, and Ernst & Young, among others.

Lieutenant General Vincent R. Stewart '81, retired three-star general from the U.S. Marine Corps and retired Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, served as Deputy Commander of U.S. Cyber Command, and is Chief Innovation and Business Intelligence Officer for Ankura.

Margaret Wong '73 is an attorney and the founder of Margaret W. Wong & Associates, LLC in Cleveland, Ohio. She founded her firm in 1978 with one desk and no secretary, specializing in immigration law. Wong, and her sister, 1973 WIU graduate Cecilia, were born in Hong Kong, moving to the United States in 1969. Today, her practice includes 15 attorneys and 40 staff members with offices in seven major U.S. cities. She has helped thousands of people coming to the United States to become permanent residents, advance their education and pursue career opportunities.

Western is an extraordinary institution with strong values that nurture success. Although I was raised thousands of miles from Western Illinois, I have embraced the very values that have imbued all of our Leathernecks.

Born in northwestern China, I grew up in eastern China, raised by parents who each had only seven years of schooling, but they instilled in us abiding values. My father had a strong sense of social justice and fairness, and my mother was a good teacher. Both were well-read and well-traveled.

My parents – who had lived through the war with Japan, World War II, the Civil War between the nationalists and the communists, and the chaotic Cultural Revolution – encouraged my siblings and me to pursue a broader world. My brother and sister also received a college education and both went on to obtain an MBA degree in Pennsylvania and Australia, respectively.

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in English at Qufu Normal University, an exemplary teachers' college in the birthplace of Chinese philosopher and educator Confucius. I spent seven years in that ancient city, four as a student and three as a young college teacher, before enrolling at Beijing University, where I obtained a Graduate Studies Diploma in English.

Thirty-three years ago, my path brought me to the United States, first to Texas, where I earned a Ph.D. in English from Texas A&M University, and then to Pennsylvania, Michigan, Florida, Vermont, Louisiana and back to Pennsylvania, and now Illinois, which my family and I consider home. My family, especially my wife, has been the most stable and reliable support structure I have the fortune to enjoy in my professional career, which has taken me from professor to department chair, Honors director, dean, provost, chancellor, president, and now my third college presidency.

Along the way, I have had the fortune of being mentored by numerous great leaders like Dr. Les Wong, President Emeritus of San Francisco State University from whom you just heard, and I learned that life is full of irony, and often, the convergence of circumstances can lead to one's destiny. Never did I dream I'd go to college, yet I ended up with an American doctoral degree.

Just as our personal lives are dynamic, institutions are organic, evolving as they respond to market and consumer needs.

These are challenging times for higher education – for both public and private institutions, both types of which I have served. Almost daily, articles can be found that speak to the difficulties faced by the entire sector. Fewer high school graduates has meant increased competition for students. Public skepticism has led many to question whether the cost of college is worth the investment. Public funding for higher education has decreased dramatically across the country, increasingly placing the financial burden of college on the shoulders of students and their families.

These challenges call for steady, reassuring leadership needed in such extraordinary times. I am an admirer of Abraham Lincoln, who launched his political career in Illinois and became president in a time of turmoil. The Civil War began soon after Lincoln entered office, and he held the country together during this very difficult period in American history.

Our times are also tumultuous and uncertain -- COVID, the Russo-Ukrainian war, resource scarcity, social and racial injustices, and more -- both for higher education and the wider world.

But never has higher education been more relevant, and the importance of universities like Western -- regional, public comprehensive universities -- has never been more clear. Not only do we shape the lives of students, creating pathways to social mobility, we play a critical role in the economic development of the regions we call home. Last year, the *U.S. News & World Report* ranked Western among the top 23 Best Colleges for Veterans, 49 Best Value School, and 47 for social mobility, based on our graduation rate for students who are the most economically challenged among those pursuing a college degree.

At Western, we are creating a culture of Institutional Distinctiveness and Growth, a culture energized by creativity, innovation, diversity, and distinction. Even as we work to align our priorities with strategies to a changing student body and make decisions necessary to best position the University for the future, there are clear signs of positive momentum. The well-deserved recent salary increase for our employees, the modest increase in Spring 2022 enrollment, and the 28% increase in Fall 2022 freshmen applications are just three examples.

Even as we enhance the quality of the student experience, we are working to serve our region and the state. The newly established Arlington and Arlene Seymour Center for Rural Education, Advocacy, Policy and Research was created to address the shortage of teachers in rural Illinois. Supporting local communities, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western helps administer Small Business Development Centers for the Illinois Department of Economic Opportunity in both Macomb and the Quad Cities. Western is also partnering with Moline in establishing a much-needed Early Childcare Center that represents close collaboration with the City in meeting community needs. Going forward, we will continue to look for new and enhanced partnerships at the intersection of the University's strengths and community needs.

An English professor, I always enjoyed reading and teaching the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson, the 19th-century American essayist, philosopher and poet, recognizing the vital link between ideas and actions, observed that "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential," for "An action is the perfection and publication of thought." At Western, that thought is the strategic plan, *Higher Values in Higher Education*, and we are acting on it and moving full speed ahead.

We will work together toward a vision of growth and distinctiveness, growth in student enrollment and financial sustainability, growth in the quality and distinction of our academic programs, enhancement of student services, and enhancement of the beauty of both the Macomb and Moline campuses. We will work harder and more creatively to prepare the University for the years ahead. We will grow strategically. We will build upon Western's proud tradition of educating and preparing students for their futures as global citizens. To achieve the overarching goals set in the Strategic Plan, I have established five top priorities in alignment with the plan. These priorities are to ensure a robust future for Western characterized by healthy enrollments, financial prosperity, and student success.

1. Recruitment and enrollment. We have developed and are implementing a recruitment plan that calls for enrollment increase by 20% over the current levels by 2027, growing new student enrollment by 3% each Fall.
2. A retention plan, including many innovative initiatives, is in place to help increase overall fall-to-fall retention rates of first-year students by 1% each year for the next five years, as well as grow our four- and six-year graduation rates by at least 1% each year. The plan was designed to address and act upon barriers to retention and student success, including their academic experience, campus experience, affordability, and a sense of belonging and community, and help close the achievement gap between the general student population and underserved populations.
3. Justice, inclusion, diversity, and equity. Western is making renewed efforts to diversify our faculty, staff, and student populations, ensuring a welcoming, diverse and inclusive campus and community. We just stood up a historic Anti-Racism Task Force composed of students, staff, faculty, and community members to combat micro-aggression and all types of racism. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Board of Trustees that recently approved my proposal to create a new Office of Justice, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity that will be formally established later this summer or early Fall.

4. Institutional distinctiveness. Western will continue to build its own brand of distinctiveness and distinction in academic programs, student services, campus beautification, among other aspects, and market our programs that set us apart from our peer institutions.

5. Internationalization. This year WIU enrolls a record number of international students from all over the world, and we will continue to build and expand partnerships with institutions across the globe that will benefit WIU and Illinois.

As I noted earlier, life is full of irony and serendipity and often, the convergence of circumstances can lead to one's destiny. Never in my wildest dreams, as a college student in China, could I have imagined that I would be standing at the helm of an American university poised for significant change. It seems that only in America does this happen to a nearly paltry immigrant student. But each of us is called upon in our moment in time to be a wise steward of the institutions entrusted to us.

Western Illinois University has distinguished faculty who are the best practitioners of their profession, and wonderful staff who demonstrate unmatched dedication to institutional and student success. With these partners, together, we will continue the legacy of those who have come before us by ensuring a stronger WIU for those who come after us. We will meet challenges as a community of faculty, staff, alumni, and students.

Clearly, the success of this venture rests not only in the hands of university leadership, the responsibility rests with all of us, and it requires courage. Aristotle in Book Six of his *Ethics* states, "Let us begin with courage," "for it is just in facing fearful issues that the brave man excels." Brave men and women are right here at WIU – they are the Leathernecks! Western Illinois University is an institution of higher learning that generates and disseminates knowledge. Socrates equates courage with knowledge, while Francis Bacon calls knowledge power. Knowledge, courage, and power -- Leathernecks have them all! Let us roll up our sleeves and show our students that we share their grit and tenacity. Onward!