PROPOSAL:  Honorary Degree Recommendation for Frederick S. Upton

Background

The Honorable Frederick S. Upton received nomination and was approved by the Honorary Degree Committee for consideration of an Honorary Degree at Western Michigan University. He earned his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Journalism from the University of Michigan in 1975.

Congressman Fred Upton has served with honor and distinction in the U.S. House of Representatives for 36 years and during his tenure has remained committed to his district and the entire state of Michigan. Our institution has greatly benefited by having a respected bipartisan leader advocating for WMU in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Congressman Upton’s dedication to bipartisanship is widely celebrated. He is a proud member and one time co-chair of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus. He participated in a civility tour with his friend and colleague Debbie Dingell to publicly demonstrate how to disagree in politics without being disagreeable and the importance of finding common ground. As part of the tour, Congressman Upton and Representative Dingell collaborated with President Montgomery to discuss the future of civility in politics. His focus on delivering results for the residents of his district and working with members on both sides of the aisle to accomplish this is truly remarkable in this era of bitter partisanship.

As Chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Congressman Upton sponsored the 21st Century Cures Act, hailed as the most important piece of legislation passed during that Congress. It laid the foundation for Operation Warp Speed and faster drug approvals, including the first COVID vaccine produced by Pfizer at its manufacturing facility in Portage. The COVID-19 vaccines shipped from Southwest Michigan have saved countless lives around the world and cemented the region as a center of health innovation and manufacturing.

WMU has certainly benefited greatly from Fred Upton’s work over the years. He is so proud of his “hometown” university and all that it stands for. WMU and Congressman Upton share similar priorities for societal well-being and are committed to ensuring that the entire region has the support and capacity to provide the skills, research capacity and environment that is needed for our continued economic success. Congressman Upton has never hesitated to push for increased funding or a new research grant opportunity to support the work being done at WMU. Most recently, Fred Upton requested and secured a $1.5 million grant for WMU’s STEM Collaboratory Workforce program to offer cutting edge approaches to diversify and expand STEM workforce pipelines.
During the pandemic, Congressman Upton sponsored the bipartisan Research Investment to Spark the Economy Act (RISE Act) to authorize approximately $26 billion in emergency relief for federal science agencies to award to research universities, independent institutions, and national laboratories working on federally-funded research projects. In introducing the bill, Congressman Upton noted, “The RISE Act is critical legislation that will support our researchers at Western Michigan University and universities across the country. Preserving our innovation pipeline will help ensure America remains a global leader in research and development.”

Fred Upton is also proud of his support for the Great Lakes. He cosponsored the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and supported full funding for it. He also fought for safe drinking water, including lead pipe replacement programs in Benton Harbor, Kalamazoo, and Flint, and pushed bipartisan legislation to set national drinking water standards for PFAS, which are also known as forever chemicals. He also fought to keep invasive species, such as the Asian Carp, out of the Great Lakes. Congressman Upton also led the way on banning microbeads, which were harming fish and contaminating the Great Lakes and other waterways.

Connecting and hearing from constituents was one of the highlights of his career. Fred Upton has responded to more than one million constituent messages, and he personally signed every single response that was sent by mail. Before COVID, Congressman Upton also made sure to visit at least one school every week when he was in the Sixth Congressional District. He sees getting young people involved in their schools and communities as more important than ever.

Bestowing this honorary degree upon him allows Western Michigan University to properly recognize a tireless advocate for us and Southwest Michigan. Fred Upton’s time in Congress is coming to an end, his passionate advocacy work is certainly not. He will continue to be a champion for WMU, the region, and the entire state for many years to come.

Recommended Action

It is recommended the Board of Trustees approve awarding Frederick S. Upton the Doctor of Laws, honoris causa (L.L.D.) for his achievements as a national leader, a respected public servant, and long-time advocate for Western Michigan University.