PROPOSAL:  Posthumous Honorary Degree Recommendation for Trustee Shani J. Penn

Background

The Western Michigan University community was saddened to learn of the passing of Board of Trustees Vice Chair Shani J. Penn in August, 2023. A strong advocate for higher education, she loyally represented people of the State of Michigan and the WMU community with an unwavering resolve.

Shani J. Penn was a graduate of Western Michigan University, an esteemed resident of Detroit, and a champion to Southeast Michigan. She navigated transformation through consulting in the areas of municipal government, contract negotiations, strategic planning, automotive client relations management, executive training, and streamlining operations. She previously worked for Daimler Chrysler Financial Services, Chrysler Financial, and served as Interim Chancellor and Chief of Staff of the Education Achievement Authority, as Senior Strategy Advisor to the Governor of the State of Michigan, and as Chief of Staff to the Emergency Manager of the City of Detroit.

Shani J. Penn was a steward of service beyond self. She was a Board member of the Detroit Public Schools Foundation, the Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan Board, the Detroit Belle Isle Conservancy Board, and the Detroit Area Pre-College Engineering Program Board. She was named one of Michigan Chronicle’s Women of Excellence in 2012 and Michigan Chronicle’s Emerging Leaders in 2013. She was selected in 2014 to the American Marshall Memorial Fellowship for the German Marshall Fund of the United States and traveled to Europe with 74 other United States fellows. She was recognized by Crain’s Detroit Business as a member of their 2014 “40 Under 40” class.

In 2016, she was appointed to the Western Michigan University Board of Trustees and spent her seven years on this Board championing fiduciary governance to benefit student access to higher education. She regularly advocated on behalf of student issues and learner success. In January, 2023 she was elected Vice Chair. A revered leader on the Board, she was vocal regarding student mental health and wellbeing, State affairs, Greek issues, civil rights and social justice, presidential assessment, alumni recognition, and organizational achievement. Her dedication, persistence, and focus earned the respect and admiration of her colleagues and constituents.

Recommended Action

It is recommended the Board of Trustees approve awarding posthumously Shani J. Penn the Doctor of Laws, honoris causa (L.L.D.) for her legacy of dedication to Western Michigan University, her esteemed public service, and her lasting contributions to our campus community, Detroit and the surrounding southeast region, and the State of Michigan.