

From Enforcement to Engagement - WMU Police Chief Scott Merlo's Student-First Approach

When Scott Merlo joined the Western Michigan University Department of Public Safety, he carried with him years of experience as a sergeant with the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety. Back then, enforcement was everything.

“If you had a can of beer or opened alcohol on you and you were underage, you got a ticket,” Merlo said. “We had no discretion. It was so adversarial that, of course, we had bottles and rocks thrown at us. They hated us because we wrote all those tickets.”

Today, his philosophy has shifted dramatically. After being transferred from the Detective Bureau to the Operations Division, Merlo said the change reshaped his perspective.

“It was so impactful to change gears, if you will, and it really changed my outlook.” Now leading WMU DPS, Merlo prioritizes students before enforcement. “Our philosophy is engagement, it’s education, and it’s enforcement. And it’s in that order and that priority. And it’s engagement first.”

That approach is visible across campus, where officers make a deliberate effort to be present in ways that build trust. They attend events, eat with students in dining halls, and encourage interaction outside of crisis situations.

“I pay for them through our training budget to go have lunch every now and then at the Valley Dining, but their goal is they can’t just go and sit and eat, they have to actually interact,” Merlo said.

Merlo believes those connections matter most when safety is on the line. “My officers feel responsible for the safety of students no matter where they are,” he said. “And the biggest thing is, we don’t get complaints. To me, that’s the biggest thing.”

For Merlo, building trust with students is more than policy, it's the foundation of campus safety.