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Foster Youth in Higher Education Initiative Statewide Conference

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Foster Youth in Higher Education Initiative
Statewide Conference
WMU President John M. Dunn
May 20, 2009

- Good morning. Thank you, Jamie, for that kind introduction. I would like to share some information about Jamie with all of you as well, but I don't want to preempt what comes later in today's presentations. Let me simply say that our moderator today, Jamie Crandell is a very special young woman with a story to tell.

I am pleased to see such a good turnout from across the state--especially from our sister institutions. We're here to talk about how we can ensure that young people who have aged out of foster care take advantage of Michigan's outstanding higher education options.

It's a topic that triggers a consistent and overwhelmingly favorable reaction whenever and wherever I discuss it--and I've talked about this in venues all over the nation.

- Western Michigan University's Foster Youth and Higher Education Initiative is an outgrowth of a statewide summit in April 2007, somewhat like this one. At the time, this university joined with representatives from colleges and state agencies to begin assessing the situation and begin post-secondary planning for Michigan's foster care population.

That event moved a few key people on this campus to think in very creative ways about how we could fill the higher ed needs of foster care youth.

I arrived on campus the following July, and it was just a few months after that I first met John Seita--a three-time WMU alumnus and a nationally known advocate for foster youth.

I heard a wonderful idea from him and from people on our campus like Admissions Director Penny Bundy, Financial Aid Mark Delorey and Social Work Professor Yvonne Unrau--all of whom had gotten to know John Seita.

- Together, they developed and proposed a plan that made such sense, touched our hearts and fit the traditions and mission of Western Michigan University.

What we needed to do, they told me, was establish an academic home and a haven for qualified students who simply do not have the extensive support network that so many of our students have had all their lives. They easily convinced me that Western Michigan University could be that support network and be that home.

- We put the program together quickly and rolled it out in January 2008--knowing that the timing was critical. We wanted to offer students the opportunity for fall 2008. We thought we'd get 15 or 20 applications. We received 70, and in September, we had 51 Seita Scholars on our campus.

- I'm going to let you hear the details of our program from the experts. John Seita and Yvonne Unrau will talk to you about the details of our program and explain how you build a program around student needs.

They'll tell you what we've learned during this first academic year. Perhaps more important to your understanding of this initiative will be the words you hear from a panel of our Seita Scholars--four young people who know what works, what doesn't and what the potential of a program like this is.

- We are proud of these young people and what they have accomplished. And we are grateful for what they have already taught us. What we have learned--about their grit and determination and their enormous potential will be used to make our program more meaningful and successful for future classes of Seita Scholars.

We have not yet had the kind of success we aim for--100 percent success--but it won't be for lack of desire to help these students beat the odds. And what we have learned from them about overcoming adversity can make each of us a better and more compassionate human being.

- What we've learned over the past year, also reaffirms our starting position--the facts that made us dig into this issue. We now that about 70 percent of young people in foster care want to go to college. Only 20 percent of those in foster care who graduate from high school actually enroll in college and only 26 percent of those who enroll earn a degree.

About 500 Michigan age out of foster care each year. Until now, only about 13 of that 500 would typically earn a degree. That is simply unacceptable. We cannot, as a society, afford to lose the potential these young people represent.

- We decided we would not accept it. We've worked across the University to build support network for students. We developed a community of scholars who can call the University their home and not have to worry about where to go during breaks or over the summer.
- And we've been sharing the stories of these young people and the complex challenges they face with a variety of audiences. I've shared the message with alumni groups around the country, members of area business and social organizations, professional colleagues and the principals in foundations and other funding agencies. People listened, nodded their heads in agreement and said, "Of course, what a good idea. How can I help?"
- Our campus community has embraced the effort. Our extended University family has reached out to help, and a growing list of private and public organizations have signed on to support our efforts.

They include:

- Michigan Campus Compact, one of today's sponsors, as well as,
- The AT&T Foundation,
- Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation of Ann Arbor, and the
- Kalamazoo Community Foundation

We have exciting information to share with you, and it's time to turn the program over to John Seita. Please enjoy your day here and listen to these presentations with your heart as well as your mind. I promise you'll be moved by what you hear. Thank you.