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Foster Care Board Remarks

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• It was just about two years ago that I first met John Seita and heard a wonderful idea from him and from three people on our staff and faculty--Penny Bundy, Mark Delorey and Yvonne Unrau. They 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 could start to level the playing field for them.

• As we developed our program, we had the support of a champion for this cause, John Seita. Dr. Seita is a veteran of the foster care system who has used his academic skills and accomplishments to advocate on behalf of young people across the country.

• People sometimes say to me, "That's nice that you honored John Seita by naming this program after him." Actually, the truth is that he honors us every day by what he's accomplished and the way he has raised awareness of the challenges foster care youth face and the enormous potential they represent. We are so proud to claim him as an alumnus of Western Michigan University.

• While we started out viewing ourselves as mentors to our Seita Scholars, the truth is we have learned as much from them as they have from us. We've learned from
them and been inspired by them. And we've been reminded that none of us makes it alone. Every one of us has had family, friends or a support network helping us along the way. Being the home community to the Seita Scholars, is a good healthy reminder of what our responsibility to one another really is.

- Our program is now a year old. Our campus community has embraced the effort. The opportunity to reach out and help this population of students has resonated with faculty, staff, students, alumni and friends of the University. Dr. Unrau's PowerPoint is replete with wonderful photos of our Seita Scholars. Those are powerful images.

- I have in my head, however, equally powerful images of members of our campus community who have reached out to lend a hand.
  - Faculty and staff members who have assembled fall welcome packs to get students started or folks who gathered to make comforters and winter throws for the beds of the Seita students.

  - Custodial and maintenance workers who volunteered to help Seita Scholars move to the designated open residence hall over the holidays--and helped them move back at the end of the period.

  - Staff members who have organized events in their homes for our scholars

- 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...
• The Kellogg Foundation
• 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

• What we've learned over the past year reaffirms our starting position--the facts that made us dig into this issue. We know 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 a quarter of those who enroll earn a degree.

• About 500 Michigan young people 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.

• When we started, experts in the field said a 25 percent retention rate would be good. We've achieved 50 percent, but it's not good enough. We want all of our Seita Scholars to succeed.

• Just more than 50 percent of the first class of Seita Scholars were back at WMU this fall. It's a good start, but we still have a ways to go. Some of those who left will be attending school elsewhere. Others have indicated they would like to return at some point. Our door will be open. We are committed to helping them succeed, if not at WMU then somewhere else; if not now, then when they are more ready.
I welcomed our new Seita Scholars to campus this fall with a simple message. I told them there's a stage in WMU's Miller Auditorium across which our graduates walk when they've earned their degrees. Each graduate's name is announced, and he or she comes forward to receive a degree. One day in the not too distant future, I'll be waiting on that stage at Miller, I told our new Seita Scholars. I'll shake their hands and present the diplomas they've earned.

There are people at our University, and I count myself among them, who will move heaven and earth to help our Seita Scholars walk across that stage. We know they have what it takes to succeed.

Thank you.