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Michigan Foster Care Conference

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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(John Dunn--Your usual great delivery that speaks to the need to give attention to foster youth in higher education, how this is something that all of us can be a part of, and how we at WMU are glad to share what we've learned.)

- Good morning. Thank you, Jamie, for that kind introduction.

- Welcome. I am pleased to see such a good turnout from across the state--especially from our sister institutions--21 colleges and universities represented here today. 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. At Western Michigan University, we've been working on this for a while. 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.

- I particularly like sharing the Western Michigan University approach with a group like this. We're still learning and making changes to our program. While I'm proud of what we've accomplished, I'm also humbled by how much we've learned from the young people in our program and how much there is still to be learned and done. Ours is a work in progress.

- You're here because you know there's a great need for a systematic approach to providing higher education for foster care youth. In Michigan alone, some 500 young people age out of foster care each year--and are left completely on their own. While an overwhelming majority of such young people want to attend college, they do not have the finances, personal support networks or basic navigation skills to apply and enroll. Until now, only 2 to 3 percent ever earned a college degree. That’s a figure we found totally unacceptable.
• Western Michigan University's Foster Youth and Higher Education Initiative is an outgrowth of a statewide summit in April 2007, somewhat like this one. That event moved a few key people on this campus to think in creative ways about how we could fill the higher education needs of foster care youth.

• Not long after I arrived on campus, I met John Seita--a three-time WMU alumnus and a nationally known advocate for foster youth--and I heard a wonderful idea from him and from three people on our campus who had been mulling over the situation.

• Admissions Director Penny Bundy, Financial Aid Mark Delorey and Social Work Professor Yvonne Unrau developed and proposed a plan that made 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.

• Our program provides free tuition for former foster youth, and it ensures they have a place--our campus--to call home year-round as well as the kind of support system and safety net families usually provide. We thought we might attract 15 to 20 students for our first class of Seita Scholars, named for a WMU alumnus who is a leading advocate for foster youth. Instead, we began in fall 2008 with 51 students. For fall 2009, we had a total of 74 students in the program. When the fall 2010 semester starts, we'll have about 120.
• While we have offered the Seita program for two years, some of our early enrollees were young people who had already persisted in their higher education goals in the community college setting. That means we have a few students who are already beginning to realize their degree goals.

• Just two weeks ago, we saw our first Seita Scholar earn his degree. Michael Fombang (FAHMbang) earned a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences with minors in chemistry and French. He's studying for his medical school exams, so he can continue on and become a doctor. In the meantime, he's giving back to the by working as a mentor in Chicago for young people in foster care.

• And next month, a very unusual young man will become our second Seita graduate. Peter Ruei, was one of the lost boys of Sudan who came to Michigan as a youngster and was placed in foster care. He was once terrified by the sight and sound of an airplane because airplanes rained death and destruction down on his village. Now, he's earning a degree in aviation from WMU and dreams of flying relief planes into war-torn areas. He's an accomplished and passionate speaker and advocate for peace--because he's experienced firsthand the horrors that war inflicts on civilians. He's also a wonderful spokesperson for the cause of foster care youth and moves audiences with his compelling personal story.

• Those two impressive young men are only our first graduates. Stay tuned. There are more to come.

• We are proud of all of our Seita Scholars what they have accomplished. And we are grateful for what they have already taught us--that every one of us owes who and what we are to people who have helped us along the way. None of us succeed alone. And none of us should forget that we can reach back and offer the same kind of helping hand that we once received to those who come after us. 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 our students beat the odds. We won't settle for anything less.

• Thank you for being here and be prepared to meet and hear from some amazing young people.