11-17-2011

Seita Fall Welcome Luncheon

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

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• Good afternoon and welcome to the fourth Seita Scholars Program Fall Welcome. I always like to say how pleased I am to welcome attendees to our events. This event, though, holds special meaning to all of us here. I truly could not be happier to see each and every one of you and be part of this celebration of student success.

• You know, it's been more than four years since three key members of our campus community--Penny Bundy, Mark Delorey and Yvonne Unrau--met John Seita and brainstormed their way into an idea that literally captured the hearts of our campus community as well as those we have shared it with around the country.

• It's a simple idea really. We decided Western Michigan University would become the support system for a group of students who did not have one. We would develop an academic home and haven and a campus network for students who had aged out of foster care and who had the desire to attend and succeed in college. We could start to level the playing field for them.

• It's an idea that has resonated as we've shared it. We asked for assistance and received generous support from organizations like the Kellogg Foundation, the AT&T Foundation, the Binda Foundation the Kalamazoo Community Foundation and the Upjohn Foundation. We received support from the Michigan Campus Compact, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and the Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation.

• We've also received assistance from individuals on our campus and in the broader community--people who want nothing more than to help students succeed. And
we've received generous assistance from the Michigan Department of Human Services, which has provided a full-time foster care worker to support you. We've recently received some new funding that I will tell you about in just a moment.

• We have representatives of some of those organizations with us today:
  • Gerald and Maureen Knight of the Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation
  • Omeeka Liggins of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation
  • Ann Rossi, Jane Macomber, Mary Chaliman, Robert Peck and Suzanne Stiles Burke of the Department of Human Services

• We have with us today as well a number of community volunteers, mentors and Seita advisory council members. We are enormously grateful to you for your support. I'd like to ask our faculty, staff and students to join me in a round of applause for all of these wonderful members of the extended Seita Scholar family.

• Why this outpouring of assistance and support? The idea is so powerful because every one of us--all the professors, administrators, staff members you work with--all of us succeeded only because we had the help of someone along the way. This idea is powerful because it reminds us to look back and be cognizant of how we've been helped and to look forward and find a way to help a new generation of students. Someday you will be in a position to "pay it forward" and help someone else through an important period of their life, but right now, the focus is on you and your success.

• Three years ago at this time--fall 2008--we welcomed our very first class of Seita Scholars. There were 51 of you from 13 Michigan counties. As we welcome you all here this fall--new and returning students--your numbers have reached more than 140. Each fall, I look forward to welcoming every one of you back, because that means you have succeeded. The Seita retention rate--the number of incoming
students who come back for their second year is now 85 percent. That's a great figure--higher than the campus as a whole, but still not good enough. We want you all to be back next year--100 percent--and we'll work hard with you to find ways to make that happen.

• A few Seita Scholars from that original class have earned their degrees. We could not be more proud of what you've accomplished. I could not be prouder of what we've learned--from you--and what we've achieved together. To the members of those previous fall classes of Seita Scholars, I have to say, Welcome Back--again. You succeeded and we've got great hopes for your next steps and continued success.

• The success of the Seita program--your success--is attracting attention nationally. That attention will trigger some changes to our program I need to tell you about. You are the first people to learn about these exciting changes. First, I want to tell you that after a careful search we have found a new director for the program. He's here today and some of you already know him. William C. "Chris" Jenson will become the program director starting Jan. 6.

• Chris has been a Seita Mentor and is a certified foster parent. He comes to us from Stryker Corp., where he serves as a senior project manager who oversees project teams of 125 people around the globe.

• Chris will replace Dr. Yvonne Unrau in the role of Seita program director. BUT you are not losing Yvonne. She will remain very much involved. The Seita success that I mentioned is giving Yvonne and others associated with the program the opportunity to spread this program's success to locations around the nation.
• Yvonne will become the director of a new Center for Foster Youth and Higher Education Studies that will be established right here on campus. This will be an opportunity to use what we have learned with the Seita program and reach out to help foster youth around our state and nation.

• The very first project that the Center for Foster Youth and Higher Education Studies will be a $1 million project that is being supported with a $700,000 gift from the Kresge Foundation. The initiative will help establish a statewide network designed to reach foster care youth as young as 12 to help them plan for college.

• That work will involve developing a network of Michigan colleges and universities that will use best practices in reaching out to foster youth. And the center will be establishing Web resources that will be designed to simplify the transition from high school to college and the transition from college to career.

• Seita Scholars, your success and your hard work are inspiring people to reach out to even more young people and put programs in place that will help them succeed as well. Thank you.

• I always like to close my welcome to Seita Scholars with this reminder I've shared with earlier classes. Work hard. Study hard and take advantage of all the opportunities you find here. But most of all, reach out for help when you need it. As I said earlier, all of us have gotten to where we are in life because someone has been there to help us when we needed it. We're here to help you succeed.

• There's a stage in 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 their degree. I'll be waiting on that stage at Miller to shake your
hand and hand you the diploma you've earned. There are people in this room today who will move heaven and earth to help you make that happen. We know you have what it takes to succeed. We're here to offer our help. Please don't hesitate to ask. We can't wait to celebrate your success.

Thank you.