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Foster Youth in Transition Meeting

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Foster Youth in Transition Meeting
"Campus Leader Call to Action: Programs on Campus"
John M. Dunn
May 8, 2012

(Panel follows youth panel. Other participants include David Eisler, FSU president; E. Royster Harper, U of M student affairs VP; and Gary Anderson, social work school director at MSU. Total time allotted is 60 minutes. Later in the day, Yvonne will discuss the Fostering Success Michigan initiative.)

• Good morning. I'm delighted that we are all gathered here today because it illustrates just how committed we are as a state to ensure we work together to reach out to young people in the foster care system and do the right thing by making sure they have an opportunity to earn college degrees. Michigan is becoming a national leader in this area, but we still have room for improvement. We're learning as we go.

• The fact that we are able to do this in Michigan--that we've been able to develop a robust partnership with the Michigan Department of Human Services--is a further testament to the statewide commitment. We are economically challenged as a state, but we also know budgets are about priorities. We've made extending higher education opportunities to foster care youth a priority. I think our decision to do that will make us a model for other states to emulate.

• At Western Michigan University, we have just finished the fourth year of our commitment and program and are planning Year 5. Our program began simply, reflecting our realization that there was--is--a need that is not widely known. Three of our professional staff members heard that need articulated by Dr. John Seita, a three-degree WMU alumnus who is now a professor at Michigan State. Our staff members developed a plan to address that need, and they brought it to me during my early months at the University.
• We all agreed that this was something we had to do. Our attitude became "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead." Instead of saying this is a hole in the system that somebody needs to fix, we decided we were all part of that system and we all have to be that somebody.

• We launched what has become popularly known on our campus as the Seita Scholars Program--and now it's expanded into an even more comprehensive program called Fostering Success. The basic elements for our program are these:
  - A full tuition scholarship for students who meet admission requirements;
  - A home for students who are foster care alumni--a place in our residence hall system they can count on even when the University is closed between semesters or sessions;
  - Campus coaches who help provide the kind of moral and academic support that usually comes from a family; and now, as our program matures,
  - Help as our Seita Scholars transition to their post-graduation lives.

• When we started;
  - We thought we might attract a dozen or so students. That first year, we started with 51. Today, we have 128 and we're getting ready for a fall incoming class.

  - When we started this, people who work with foster youth around the nation told us we would be lucky to achieve a 15-20 percent retention rate. Our most recent freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is 76 percent and our average retention rate for the first three classes is 71 percent.

  - When we started, we knew that fewer than 3 percent of foster youth earn a college degree by age 25. We found that unacceptable and decided the outcome had to be much better than that. We've had 12 graduates so far,
including our first four-year student who graduated just 10 days ago. Two more students are slated for June graduation. Of the 215 students who have been part of this program since its inception, some 65 percent have earned a degree or are still on track to graduate.

-When we started, we had no idea how we were going to pay for this. Since then, the philanthropy community has opened its arms and wrapped them around our students. DHS has reconfigured and relocated its staff to be even more effective with our students.

- And our campus and extended communities have embraced our students as well and offered support in ways that have been profound. Not only have we received support for our students and program, but we've also received support for the dissemination of some best practices in this arena.

• When we started this just four years ago, we truly did not recognize all the challenges or all of the opportunities. Our students have helped us find the right path. I would be remiss if I did not thank them for their extraordinary generosity in sharing their stories--not just with us, but with the world at large. So many of them have made it their mission to raise the profile of this issue and help expand opportunities for those still in the foster care system--those who will come to our university after them. It is really their willingness to put faces and personal stories on this largely overlooked need that has made all the difference in the world. Their stories and their resilience have moved and engaged people all around our state and nation.

• It's been a learning process. Our students are teaching us, and we're still learning. This is truly all about our students, and we're pleased now to have the opportunity to be able to share what we've learned with our sister institutions.
Thank you.

(Extra data: Miscellaneous information)
• Seita Scholars come from 37 Michigan counties.
• 77 percent come to WMU as freshmen, 23 percent as transfers.
• They represent more than 36 majors on campus.
• Dec. 2011--17 Seita Scholars made the Deans List.
• Seita Scholars have been Res Hall assistants, earned an NSF internship, participated in Study Abroad, been on the varsity track team, been part of the WMU Color Guard and held leadership positions in student organizations.
• Tuition costs to WMU for four years (through 2012 summer I session)--$3,481,192.
• Annual cost for 160 students--nearly $1.7 million)