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Fostering Success Michigan Welcome

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Good morning. Thank you, Maddy, for that great introduction, and welcome to Michigan and to Western Michigan University.

• To all of our guests on campus today, welcome. We are extraordinarily glad to see you here and to have the opportunity, together, to bring all of our best thinking and lessons learned to the goal of making sure every student in foster care has the opportunity to realize his or her full potential. I suspect we have a lot to learn from each other, and I know we still have so much more to learn from the young people who are our students, clients, constituents and friends.

• At Western Michigan University, the past four years have been a journey that has taken us to a place we never would have imagined at the start. More than four years ago, three key members of this campus community--Penny Bundy, Mark Delorey and Yvonne Unrau--met John Seita, who is a three-time WMU alumnus. Together, they 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.
• The approach would be basic. We would provide a tuition scholarship, and the campus would be their home—even during semester breaks. We would develop a support network to help them through all those transitions that are part of college life. The first question everyone asked was "How are you going to pay for this. My answer was straightforward. I had no idea, but it is something we have to do because it iss the right thing to do.

• When we started, we thought maybe a dozen or 15 students at most would enroll. We began the program in fall 2008 with 51 students. This spring, we had more than 140 students--we call them Seita Scholars--and we saw our first four-year graduate. Our students are succeeding and we're learning from them every step along the way.

• Every step along the way, we've also been supported by our campus community, by citizens in our city and surrounding communities, by alumni, by the generosity of several foundations and by the support of our state Department of Human Services.

• Why this outpouring of assistance and support? The idea is simply powerful because

1) It startles people who see young people from supportive family environments around them every day. Most of us never realized or even thought about the tremendous need and struggle of young people trying to succeed without that support network.

2) Every one 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 they 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 needs to be on helping them find their success.

- The stark numbers are shocking to people and drive home the odds that foster youth face. While 70 percent of young people in foster care indicate that they want to go to college, only 20 percent of those who graduate from high school actually enroll in a higher education institution. And only a quarter of those who who enroll go on to earn a degree. About 500 Michigan young people age out of foster care each year. Until now, only about a dozen of that 500 would typically earn a degree.

- The need is compelling. It's easy to see we can and must do better. And we're fortunate to have the assistance of those who have heard and heeded our call for assistance. You'll hear from some of them today. Earlier this year, the Kresge Foundation recognized the need for us to share best practices and come together as a state to take this work to the next level. Kresge is funding our statewide effort with a $700,000 investment. The Foundation's William Moses is here this morning to talk about Kresge's vision and hope for the future.

- Alexia Everett of the College Success Foundation is here to talk about state policies that can improve outcomes for foster care youth.

- John Emerson of Casey Family Programs will talk about financial aid delivery and support systems.
• Maddy Day will give you an overview of the Fostering Success Michigan initiative.

• And you'll hear from a phenomenal young woman, WMU's own Jamie Crandell, who has been an integral part of our Seita Scholars program, first as a student and now as a coach to other students.

• It will be a full day and one I hope will leave you brimming with ideas and amazed at the potential that exists--the potential to develop our most precious resource, our young people.

• Late in April, it was my absolute pleasure to stand on the stage in Miller Auditorium here on campus and hand a diploma to the very first of our Seita Scholars to earn a bachelor's degree after four years in our program. Heather Nichols of Coopersville earned her degree in exercise science and plans to become a physical therapy assistant. Later this month, another of our four-year grads will graduate. Soon, they'll start walking across that stage in larger and larger numbers. It can't happen soon enough for me. I wish for all of you starting similar programs the same kind of success and the absolute joy of watching a good idea--a great idea--pay off.

Enjoy your day and don't be shy about sharing your good ideas. We need every good idea we can lay our hands on.

Thank you.