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Welcome to Seita Scholars

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• Good afternoon. I know I'm not the first to welcome you to Western Michigan University, but I may be one of the most enthusiastic. First let me say welcome to our newest Seita Scholars. We are so happy to have you here as part of the Bronco family. To the members of 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.

• This is the sixth time we have held a formal fall welcome for students in the Seita Scholars Program. This event always holds special meaning to me, because each year it is a celebration of student success--and each year there is more and more evidence of Seita Scholar achievement to celebrate.

• This year, when we look at how far we've all come together, we can look with real pride at the fact that as of June's commencement, there are 28 graduates of our program. That alone is cause for celebration. But we've got additional cause for celebration because there are so many more of you in the pipeline and set to graduate in December, April or June. Watching that happen becomes a special moment for every one of us in this room--the donors who make this possible, your coaches, mentors, professors, fellow students, favorite staff members and your University president.

• The basic idea for the Seita Program is a simple one. It is this: Western Michigan University can be the support system for a group of students who do not already have one. We have developed an academic home and haven and a campus network for students who have aged out of foster care and who have the desire to attend and succeed in college. We want to level the playing field.
• It's an idea that resonated when we 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, the Kresge 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 of Ann Arbor. And, we are especially honored to have with us this afternoon Gerald and Maureen Knight from the Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation.

• 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 others. Someday you will be in a position to "pay it forward" and help someone else through an important period of his or her life, but right now, the focus is on you and your success.

• And you know, we've been sharing this idea for six years now, and it never ceases to amaze me just how much power it has. People hear about the program and your success, and it touches them deeply. Earlier this year, my wife Linda was in Salt Lake City to visit family. She ran into a the publisher of the local newspaper there who asked her what keeps her occupied and excited about things here in Kalamazoo. Linda told that publisher about the Seita Scholars program and how the campus community comes together to support all of you and help you succeed. That's all it took. Before long, a reporter from the Deseret News was calling our campus to talk with a student (Courtney Maher) and with Chris Harris to get the details. If you haven't seen the resulting story--complete with a recent commencement photo--check it out on WMU's Facebook page.
I always like to close my welcome to new Seita Scholars with this reminder I've shared with earlier classes. Much has been done to set the stage for you to reach your academic and personal goals at WMU. Now—and listen closely—the rest is up to you. Work hard. Study hard. 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. Now it's our turn to do the helping. 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.