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Foster Youth Remarks, Legislative Forum

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WMU President John M. Dunn
Foster Youth Remarks, Legislative Forum
March 26, 2014

- Good morning/afternoon. I'm delighted to be here today to talk about a topic that has become one of Western Michigan University's hallmarks--service to young people who have aged out of Michigan's foster care system.
- With 160 young people who have come to us from the foster system, we have what we believe to be the largest comprehensive higher education support system for former foster youth in the nation. Their presence on campus provides us with an incredible opportunity to learn from them how we as a state and as a university community can best support them as they pursue their goals.
- Students who are part of our program are known as Seita Scholars. We're in our sixth year of providing tuition scholarships, a home they can count on and a network of support to help all students succeed. And as of December's commencement ceremony, we have 39 young people who have earned a bachelor's degree. There is a group of 18 Seita Scholars on track to graduate during our spring and summer commencements, so the celebrations on campus will continue.
- Having our Seita Scholars graduate provides a series of special moments for every one of us involved--our partners with the Department of Human Services and Legislature, the donors who make our program possible, campus academic coaches, mentors, professors, fellow students, favorite staff members and this University president.
- We have some Seita Scholars with us today, and I'd like to introduce and acknowledge them. With us are:

- _____

- _____
- _____

Thank you. We are so proud of each of you.

- 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 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.
- When we began this effort we knew that there was only a 5 percent or less chance that a young person aging out of foster care in Michigan would earn a college degree. That's a loss of human potential we just could not tolerate.
- Our idea to provide the kind of support needed resonated whenever 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.
- The Michigan Legislature and the Michigan Department of Human Services provided support, and several legislators reached out to champion our efforts in a variety of ways. Rep. Margaret O'Brien has become a mentor to a Seita Scholar. Sen. Tonya Schuitmaker helped secure the first round of legislative funding for the program, and Rep. Peter MacGregor helped to secure this year's funding. They all have our deep gratitude, and we regard them as colleagues in this initiative. They recognized the power of a good idea.

- The idea is so powerful because every one of us--all the professors, administrators, staff members who work with the program, all our private and public supporters and, of course, 160 eager, talented and hard-working Seita Broncos. We all had the help of someone in our early years. 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 our students will be in a position to "pay it forward" and help someone else through an important period of his or her life.
- 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 our students' success, and it touches them deeply. They want to know more. And with each passing day, I have a new student success story to tell. Students come to our university from 42 Michigan counties, they persist, they pursue their dreams. (Seita Scholars can be found in some 40 different degree programs). And they succeed.
- Last week, we held an event on our campus to honor WMU seniors who had been selected by their departments as Presidential Scholars--just one per department who had been judged by faculty to be the very best of the best in that discipline. Amanda Shelton of Detroit, one of our Seita Scholars, was named the Presidential Scholar in Gender and Women's Studies. She is double majoring in sociology and will graduate next month and go on to pursue a master's degree in social work either at WMU or Uof M. Her career goal is to work with at-risk youth--ideally in Detroit to start out and then at the federal level so she can have an impact on national policy. She knows what's possible for those youth. She's been there. I could talk for some time about her accomplishments on campus and in our community, but let's just say she has been involved as a volunteer, intern, student leader and academic role model.

- There are others like Amanda around our state who just need the opportunity and some support to not only be personally successful but also make a difference for future generations of students.
- We're learning from them every day, and we're working with our colleagues across the state through our Center for Fostering Success and the Fostering Success Michigan network. Our goal is to continue to identify best practices and document the potential benefits for students in our state and nation. Earlier this year, Western Michigan University was singled out for national recognition by a leading social policy organization. The Center for the Study of Social Policy—CSSP—named WMU's Center for Fostering Success as one of 15 programs around the nation that are making a critical difference in the lives of foster care youth. That honor belongs to our students. It's based on their success.

I always like to welcome our new Seita Scholars to campus each fall with a reminder I've shared with earlier classes. "Work hard. Study hard and take advantage of all the opportunities you find here," I tell them. But most of all, I tell them to reach out for help when they need it. 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, and we're ready to do what it takes to ensure student achievement. There are people on our campus and across our state who are ready to move heaven and earth to make sure students succeed. Many of them are here with us today.

- Thank you for being here to learn more about what we're doing. Do not hesitate for a moment to ask questions or share your observations about how we can continue to help our students succeed.

Thank you.