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Fostering Success Michigan Summit

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Dr. John M. Dunn
Fostering Success Michigan Summit
May 16, 2014

- Good morning. It's my delight today to offer you an official and heartfelt welcome to Western Michigan University from our entire campus community.
- As I look around this room today, I am quite simply awestruck by the care, energy and passion that all of you--all of *us*--are ready and willing to pour into the cause of increasing access to higher education for youth in foster care.
- It is almost seven years ago that three members of the WMU community came to me--literally ablaze with the fire of a great idea. That great idea was to find a way our University could become a place where foster youth could go to college, be coached, have a year-round home and thrive. The need that they outlined that day touched me deeply. I quickly learned that the idea, and the need for it, resonated clearly with literally everyone I shared it with, in turn.
- That idea became our Seita Scholars program, which now serves about 160 students annually. That Seita Scholars program led to our Center for Fostering Success, and an opportunity to join with all of you to share best practices through this wonderful network, *Fostering Success Michigan*. As I look around me today, I realize how far we've come, what we can do, what we can learn, and what work we still have to do.
- This is the third annual summit of Fostering Success-Michigan. I understand the theme this year is simple. You were all asked to focus on:

"One Thing: Transforming Your Practice, Transforming the Education to Career Pipeline."

- Several weeks ago, when I was asked to speak at this event, I was encouraged to share one thing in my daily work that supports students from foster care and helps them be successful in higher education. It was a great suggestion, but it seemed too simple. No "one thing," I thought, can make that kind of impact.

- But then, I heard something early this week that reminded me of the very basic truth that underlies this entire effort. It's a truth I recognized and spoke about several years ago and then quietly tucked away. It is quite simply the one thing we all need to remember as we move forward and as our students move forward.

- What did I hear? Maddy Day, WMU's outreach coordinator in our Center for Fostering Success, was interviewed on WMUK, our campus NPR affiliate. She was asked about this event and what the focus of the summit is. She did a terrific job of outlining all of the elements of this event and sharing what's important about the topic.

- But that one thing she said that caught my attention was triggered by this question. "What do foster care children need when they age out of foster care, move on to college, get a degree and go on from there?"

She replied very thoughtfully. "We focus a lot when we are helping youth transition out of foster care and into college on the idea of independence, she said, "but I think we're wrong when we do that. I don't know any successful adult who is

completely independent. I really believe we need to instill a sense of interdependence and a sense of being able to ask for help."

- That's the key--the one simple truth that we need to remember. None of us got where we are today on our own. Every one of us--all the professors, administrators, health care professionals, government officials, and 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 how meaningful that help can be. It's powerful because when we do that we realize our own responsibility is to look forward and find a way to help a new generation of young people.

- I think that's why we're all here today. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "We're all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth."

- And that's the message for the young people here in the room today and those on our campuses. Don't be reluctant or afraid to reach out and ask for help. Because we've all been in need of help in our lives, you may be surprised at how happy we are to respond to you and provide the assistance you need. Some of us will move heaven and earth to help you become the successful people we know you can be.

- 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.

- Thank you all for being here and for the important work you all do. Enjoy your day here at Western Michigan University.