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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, and I had a chance to welcome many of you at another event last weekend. But I'm here today to deliver the official welcome to our newest Seita Scholars. We are so happy to have you here as part of the Bronco family. And to the members of previous fall classes of Seita Scholars welcome back. Today is a great day to be a Bronco.

• This is the seventh time we have held a formal fall event to welcome students in the Seita Scholars Program and acknowledge the donors who make this program possible. This event always holds special meaning to me. It is a celebration of student success--and each year there is more and more evidence of that success to celebrate. Students, your hard work, and donors, your generosity, make that success possible.

• Over the years, the number of Seita Scholars has grown at this fall welcome event. Even more important is the fact that the numbers of Seita Scholars at our commencement ceremonies has grown. We now have 42 program graduates, and many of you are on target to graduate soon. I remember the very first ceremony at which a Seita Scholar graduated--one very proud young man stood with me backstage for a photo. Before long, we had a group of three graduating. Now, at every ceremony, when we try to gather the Seita Scholars for a group photo, the wide-angle lens on our photographer's camera is used to its fullest, and we take multiple photos of scholars with coaches and families, favorite professors and staff members.

• These moments--when you begin the program and when you've successfully earned your degrees--are among the moments that tell me that you are helping us get it right. Over the years, you have taught us so much, but we have so much still to learn. We now
have a Center for Fostering Success to help gather those lessons you've helped us learn and share them with other institutions.

• 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. We have with us this afternoon Gerald and Maureen Knight from the Speckhard-Knight Charitable Foundation. And we've received support from hundreds of individual donors and volunteers.

• 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.

• Over the years, I've noticed that Seita Scholars "get" that idea of paying it forward and helping someone else succeed. Looking at the list of students in the program and their majors I'm struck by how many of you are headed for careers in what are traditionally
viewed as the "helping" professions"--health care, social work and teaching. Nearly 25 percent of you are headed for careers in those disciplines. Whatever your major, I'm confident that you'll be in a position someday to reach out and help someone you encounter.

• My welcome to new Seita Scholars comes with this reminder I've shared with earlier classes. Work hard. Study hard and 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 present the diploma you've earned. It will happen. 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.

Thank you.