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Givers and Receivers- Who Benefits the Most?

Michigan Student Financial Aid Association

John M. Dunn

January 29, 2018

Many years *ago*, 1972, to be specific, I gave a talk in Minneapolis titled "The Teacher in Disguise." I shared my experiences working with my students and other mentees with mental retardation, individuals whom I felt were teaching me more each day than I was teaching them. Important lessons such as cueing, reinforcement, patience, repetition—to name just a few—proved to be invaluable techniques which guided these special students toward confidence building and independent thinking. With a backdrop of patient, methodical repetition, these students became attentive learners who discovered individual success on many levels. It was personally gratifying for me as a mentor to witness breakthroughs, no matter how small. Their delight in discovery was contagious. As they made strides in learning, so did I.

I was intrigued by the insight each student possessed and shared with me and their classmates each and every day. I became clear to me that we teach best and learn best in quiet ways—by guiding, encouraging, reinforcing and listening. The operative word is

listening. Sometimes I think we humans would be better *off, much better off*, if we had bigger ears and smaller mouths.

What does all of this have to do with today's topic, "Givers and Receivers--Who benefits the Most?" I believe that through a very innovative program developed at Western Michigan University for foster youth, known as the Seita Scholars Program, we are learning more and more about how best to serve all youth with unique challenges. And what we learn has benefits for *all* our students.

Let me share a brief background as to the development of the Seita program. In 2007-2008, the first academic year of my presidency at WMU, I met with three staff members who shared an intriguing idea. The Big Three were **Mark Delorey**, Director of Financial Aid, **Penny Bundy**, Director of Admissions, and **Dr. Yvonne Unrau**, associate professor in the School of Social Work, and they informed me of their commitment and zeal to help foster youth. They explained that over 500 youth annually "age out" of Michigan's system for foster youth and that 70% of the youth wanted to continue their post-secondary education, but sadly only 5% were doing so. Instead of college, most are forced to find a job (if they can find one), a place to live and find their own path to survival. Not a pretty picture. These young people

with potential were being turned loose in the world to fend for themselves without finances and often without the security of a loving family or friends.

The Big Three also described to me a remarkable human being, **Dr. John Seita**, whose name now honors our program. John's story is one of great persistence and success.

First, he's a 3-time Bronco! As a foster youth himself, John was the epitome of resilience. In the 1980's, he powered through obstacles to complete a bachelor's, and master's degree at WMU, and earned his highest degree, the EdD in Educational Leadership in 1993. Today, John Seita is a highly-valued faculty member in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. Dr. Seita is an inspiration for all.

The question The Big Three posed to me was simple, "Surely, can't we do better?" They knew of my background and commitment to "forgotten or overlooked" populations-- those from challenging socioeconomic conditions, individuals with disabilities and underserved minority populations--and they hoped I would be an ally. Frankly, their conversation stunned me. Because of my own ignorance, I had never really thought about nor focused on foster youth. Our conversation was

riveting and I was sold. Western Michigan University would commit to not only providing an education for college-ready foster youth, we would provide a home, food, and a place to live year-round--even during periods when the University was between semesters or on break. Why? Because for some, their only home for the next 4+ years would be residential campus living.

When I met later with our University Trustees and explained what I had learned and that I had committed our University to this endeavor, they were very supportive. As one said, "Great initiative! Now how will we pay for it?" My response was, "Sir, I do not have a clue, but we will find a way."

As we all know, lack of resources kills many good ideas but, fortunately, our passion and commitment to the foster youth initiative were such that we connected with a number of foundations and passionate individuals who also believed in the program and in providing educational support for foster youth. One by one, the program benefactors materialized. Assistance came from the State, too, through the leadership and commitment of former HHS Director Maura Corrigan, and legislative initiatives, our Seita Scholars Program was underway. We will never raise enough money to cover the costs of the

entire program, but I believe, given the widespread support on campus and in the community, the future of the WMU Seita Scholars Program is indeed very bright and it will remain an essential thread in the fabric of the university.

What have we learned through the program? There have been many great lessons. First, let me deviate and share with you a finding from a few summers ago. We invited several junior-high foster youth to our campus. These kids were approximately 12-15 years old. While they traveled to WMU to visit a college campus, maybe for the first time ever, another purpose was for WMU to fine-tune its Seita program. Sessions were structured to hear from these kids and be attentive to their stories. The listeners were university, city and government officials. The kids, our guests, were outstanding. They were articulate, clear and consistent in the message that the "system is broken". They felt that no one was really hearing them and understanding their wants and needs. For them, the non-listeners included teachers, case managers and lawyers assigned to represent them.

As we listened, the panel of university, city and government officials concluded, "Yes, the system is broken. But folks, the system is *US*", and hopefully through the program developed at WMU we are learning and

empowering more individuals, including graduates of the foster system and WMU, to be the agents of change.”

So, let's return to what we have learned from the Seita Scholars. What are the invaluable gifts they have returned to us?

1. **Foster Youth are resilient.** They have faced countless challenges and changes in their lives. Some have been in as many as 15 different foster homes. They have been moved from school to school, but yet they manage to learn and make the personal adjustments to survive significant disappointments which include the loss of family members and affection.
2. **They are bright.** While there may be some deficiencies in their education- some gaps- they have proven to possess the tenacity to recover in those academic areas where weaknesses exist. They are quick studies and will, if given support, rise to the occasion.
3. **Achieving trust is a challenge.** These young people have been told repeatedly "trust me" only to be disappointed on numerous occasions. We learned very early that for our Seita Scholars we definitely need the quiet approach to learning that I spoke of earlier. Reinforcement,

patience and consistency goes a long way toward earning their trust over time. To do this means that program leaders need to be clear in their expectations, honest, consistent, and careful to avoid statements or promises that might go unfulfilled.

4. **Fitting into university life is not easy!** Many of us recall our experience as parents taking our son or daughter to campus as freshmen. We loaded up the station wagon or truck and brought lots of “essential stuff” to outfit an 8’x8’ room in the residence hall. Some of us even hired a U-Haul to serve as the transport vehicle. Contrast or visualize this scene. A Seita Scholar steps out of a State vehicle with one laundry bag that contains all she has to begin her college experience. Life is not always fair. Fortunately, our campus and community responded by making certain that life's basic necessities are provided for our foster youth. This includes toiletries, towels, sheets, blankets, sometimes clothing, along with the books and basic materials needed for classroom performance.
5. **Our lessons keep coming.** What our Seita Scholars teach us on a daily basis is that there are hundreds of other students at WMU and other universities whose socioeconomic situation is such that they, too, need our help with both big obstacles and small ones. And as an recognized

International University, WMU has become very aware of the needs of these students as well. How is this done? How are the supplies generated? Local vendors take pride in being a part of the solution by donating what they can. Community members pitch-in too by supplying blankets, laundry supplies and other personal items.

6. **Success can take time.** As administrators and leaders, we've learned that, even with the material necessities we try hard to provide our Scholars, their medical and emotional needs are widely diverse and often persistent. Foster youth require consistency and patience beyond what is customary, as they navigate through the University system. Some need to "stop out" for a semester or two, in order to deal with personal issues. This, *too*, presents a time for developing trust. Shall we abandon them or will we keep the door open for their eventual, "hoped for" return? WMU is their family and we try, whenever possible, to maintain a welcoming community and safe haven for all students who seek a "fresh start."
7. **Seita Scholars also taught us that some agency rules are outdated, and demeaning.** There was a time when students on food stamps had to go to the store, collect what they needed in their shopping cart, have the items rung up and then go back to the agency for the funds needed to make the purchase. Can you imagine how the student felt?

Fortunately, because of WMU advocacy and caring State officials, this practice has changed.

8. **Advisors are essential.** For many, the challenges of being a foster child require access to counseling and a well-defined support system.

Fortunately, at WMU a highly skilled Counseling Center was already in place. But we needed more. We needed to make certain that our foster youth had a 24/7 support system. This was achieved by creating staff positions of "campus coaches" who are accessible around the clock, as needs arise. Without these skilled and caring "coaches" the Seita program effectiveness would be severely impaired. As our program has matured, we have been able to employ "coaches" who themselves were foster youth.

9. **Success is contagious.** Another valuable lesson that we have learned from our Seita Scholars is that other students, too, could benefit from many of the approaches we have found helpful for foster youth. Most importantly is creating a campus climate that is warm and supportive to all. A campus that recognizes each student's value is the Western Michigan University goal. Failure to do that is not an option. This student support must come from all directions--from other students, faculty, staff and administrators. We collectively have a responsibility to create a campus climate that is open, welcoming and friendly. Little

things matter such as greeting one another, saying hello, lifting one's head from the iPhone long enough to nod or smile at another human being. This is critical for all students and I am very pleased that our campus has captured the spirit.

10. **Time to Relax.** Vacations and Holidays are special- something that students anticipate and welcome. Many return home or buddy-up with a friend to visit their home. We knew early on, thanks to Dr. Seita, that it was essential for us to make sure that during semester breaks, our doors remained open for some students, like foster youth, who had no other place to go. We are their home! This meant that access to meals would also be necessary. Thanks again to our community, faculty and dining and residence hall staff, students are safe and well fed year-round.

11. **Testimonial.** In the voice of one of our Seita Scholars: Alexis Lenderman, "One of the most important aspects of the Seita Scholars program is the fact that we are guaranteed year-round housing. For students like myself who didn't have stability growing up, and having to transition into 10 different schools, I was able to call WMU my home without concern of having to leave and find some place to live during breaks. Some students, without this opportunity would be faced with

homelessness"

12. **Program Success.** Perhaps, the most important lesson we have learned is that if we level the playing field, if we really care, foster youth can and will succeed. To date, we have seen 125 Seita Scholars graduate. They are moving on to be productive citizens, contributors to society and ambassadors for supporting other young people, whether from a foster background, socioeconomical challenges or a troubled home. Universities can be effective as change agents. Not surprisingly, many of the Seita Scholar (both current students and graduates) major in fields that focus on helping others, e.g. social work, counseling, education, nursing and the therapies. I am confident they will be empathetic and outstanding care givers!

13. **Support from the top is very important.** I welcomed the newly-arrived Seita Scholars to WMU every fall. This provided an opportunity to meet the scholars and they, in turn, met me. They were invited to the President's home for a pool party and picnic and they turned out in droves. Similar occasions throughout the year encourage students to "get to know" their President and other university leaders. They learned of our stories and how access to education can become the equalizer and lead to a fulfilling and rewarding life.

In conclusion, I have a few parting thoughts. Know this: what WMU has done can be replicated or made even better. Through the great work of Maddy Day, with support from the State, the Fostering Success team is committed to sharing nationwide what we have learned and helping other institutions to do the same for foster youth in their regions. The keys are leadership, commitment and support from faculty, staff and community. An key element, however, is the role of the Campus Coach. These individuals play a critical role in being there 24/7 to provide counsel and assistance.

Again, in the voice of Bronco student Alexis Lenderman, “Once I joined the Seita Scholars Program, I was assigned to a **campus coach**, who is now my go-to person for **navigating** the higher education processes, such as financial aid, registering for classes, as well as someone who is there for me to celebrate my **triumphs** and support me through my **struggles**. Having a campus coach allows you to focus on being a student and alleviates all of the unnecessary stresses that deter many other foster youth from perusing and completing higher education.”

A major lesson learned from our Seita Scholar program is our initial quest to help foster youth quickly turned in a direction of what we

were learning about responding to their needs. They have helped us review and think through not only their needs, but our purpose--what the modern university should be--a place that recognizes the humanity that we share and commits itself to being an agent of change for the betterment of society and the world.

