A proposal for
Fostering Success: A Center for Foster Youth and Higher Education
at Western Michigan University

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Statement of Purpose

Annually in the United States, 25,000 young adults age out of foster care before their 21st birthday; they join the ranks of approximately 300,000 former foster youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, the prime college-going age. Because of their independent status and experiences related to growing up in foster care, these youth remain dismally underrepresented on college campuses. While research studies estimate that 70 percent of foster youth desire to go to college, only about 20% of college-qualified foster youth enroll, compared to 60 percent of youth not from foster care. Fewer than 3 percent of foster youth earn a college degree in 6 years, compared to 24 percent of youth not from foster care. Without a trajectory to college, former foster youth face the realities of unemployment, homelessness and incarceration in their young adult years.

In fall 2008, Western Michigan University joined a national movement to support foster youth in higher education by launching a campus-based support and tuition-scholarship effort for students from foster care, most commonly known as the Seita Scholars Program. The Program grew the number of former foster youth under the age of 23 attending Western Michigan University from 12 in spring 2007 to over 140 in spring 2012. The third-semester retention rate for each of the last two years averages over 75 percent, which is on par with the University average, and suggests that the Program is leveling the academic playing field for this at-risk group of students.

The Program’s rapid growth and early success has brought a national spotlight to WMU for its efforts in supporting foster youth in higher education. For example, the Seita scholars were featured in a January issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Governor Snyder included mention of it in his 2012 State of the State address. In addition, over one million dollars have been garnered from external foundations to support Program operations. Also, The Kresge Foundation recently awarded WMU over $700,000 for a one-million dollar outreach initiative. This initiative will focus on stimulating support for foster youth on other Michigan campuses and improve support for Michigan youth ages 12 to 25 to not only

Figure 1: Three components of the Center
access and earn a college degree, but also to transform their lives through the college experience and successfully start a career.

These two efforts—the Seita Scholars Program and the statewide outreach initiative—form two of three pillars of the Center. The work already underway in these two units is aligned with the mission of the University:

“Western Michigan University is a learner-centered, research university, building intellectual inquiry and discovery into undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs in a way that fosters knowledge and innovation, and transforms wisdom into action. As a public university, WMU provides leadership in teaching, research, learning, and service, and is committed to enhancing the future of our global citizenry.”

Consistent with the mission of Western Michigan University, the work of the Center is guided by the learning needs of students from foster care. This student-centered focus is data driven, and applied research and evaluation activities are utilized to inform teaching and service efforts. The Center’s aim is to build intellectual inquiry, investigation, and discovery into the transition of young people from foster care to higher-education programs. Further, the Center provides leadership in teaching, research, learning, and public service on topics of foster care.

**Vision**

The Fostering Success Center exists to improve college access, academic success, graduation, and career advancement among foster youth and former foster youth. The Center provides leadership in training, applied research and service to students from foster care, and is committed to enhancing collaborative initiatives that yield collective-impact results.

**Mission**

The Fostering Success Center provides student support, outreach and applied research programs for the ultimate purpose of advancing knowledge, understanding and strategies that help foster youth successfully transition to young adulthood through the experience of post-secondary education.

**Goals**

1. Identify best practices and policies for successful college access, retention, graduation and post-graduate employment for foster youth and former foster youth.
2. Promote successful transitions for foster youth from foster care-to-college and college-to-career.
3. Create a community of scholars among foster youth aspiring to attend, enrolled and graduated from post-secondary institutions.
4. Build lifelong social, educational and career networks for youth in and aged out of foster care.
5. Develop effective strategies and tools to address childhood trauma-related obstacles that impede success in education and employment among former foster youth.
6. Collaborate with campus and community partners to provide effective and holistic student service, professional education and research programs.
7. Improve professional and paraprofessional responsiveness to the needs of foster and former foster youth in college and career.
8. Increase awareness of needs, challenges and strategies of foster youth in higher education by disseminating evaluation and research results widely to academic, child-welfare and public and private sector organizations.

Center Components

As seen in Figure 1, there are three main components that organize the activities of the center: Student Support (i.e., Seita Scholars Program), Teaching & Training, and Research. Below is a sampling of activities to be carried out within each component.

A. Student Support (Seita Scholars Program)

A sampling of current activity through the Seita Scholars Program, the student support component of the Center includes: Training modules for the campus-coach model of student support; career mentoring for students from foster care; identification of life-domain obstacles and solutions; peer leadership development; program events; community partnerships with the Department of Human Services to bring foster youth in high school together with former foster youth in college for social and educational activities; and course-based opportunities for students from foster care that promote healing, learning and healthy transition from traumatizing childhood to thriving young adulthood.

Over the first three years of program start-up, the Seita Scholars Program built operations and services with input from students and by giving consideration to data gathered primarily from students and staff. The Program’s practice framework has evolved to include several essential components, including:

- Three phases of college: (1) transition from foster care, (2) college student, and (3) graduation and career transition;
- Seven life domains critical to transition for youth from foster care: (1) academics, (2) finances, (3) housing, (4) physical and mental health, (5) social relationships and community connections, (6) personal and cultural identity, and (7) life skills; and,
- A two-fold Intervention approach consisting of: (1) individual-level intervention with students, and (2) system-level intervention with campus and community entities.

B. Teaching & Training

A sampling of new activities started through the Teaching & Training component of the Center includes:

- A statewide higher-education consortium on foster youth;
- A comprehensive high-quality and youth-friendly web site for sharing resources;
- Collaboration with the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) to identify local college access networks (LCANS) primed for enhancement with foster-youth supports;
- A University course focused on training students on ethical research methods;
• Annual conferences designed to disseminate best practices and collective-impact strategies;
• A youth speakers bureau;
• A lecture series and public forums about and presented by foster youth and other experts;
• Training webinars and printed publications providing access to best practices;
• Training and resource materials for other University departments; and
• a graduate fellowship for Ph.D. students

C. Research

A sampling of proposed activities in the research component includes applied research and evaluation. The Center will engage in three types of applied research focused on the activities conducted by the service and outreach components of the center: (1) program outcomes, (2) program process and operations, and (3) program effort.

Outcome evaluation will address matters such as:
• Number of LCANs with foster youth specific supports;
• Number of enhanced on-campus support systems for foster youth;
• The factors associated with the retention and failed retention of students from foster care;
• The factors associated with college completion;
• Follow-up studies of students from foster care post-graduation; and
• Changes in university, nonprofit and government agency policies and practices.

Process and operations evaluation will address matters such as:
• The needs and demands of foster youth during their transition from foster care;
• The academic career paths of students from foster care;
• The types of services provided to students from foster care in the seven life domains;
• The issues addressed by campus coaches in meetings with students;
• The interventions of campus coaches and other University units and staff.

Effort evaluation will address matters such as:
• The number of students served;
• The units of service provided by Campus Coaches and other University units and staff; and
• The units and types of services and benefits provided by volunteers.

Operational Plan

The name of the center will be Fostering Success: Center for Foster Youth and Higher Education.

This is a University center as it is concerned with subject matter that spans several colleges including but not limited to Arts and Science, Education and Human Development, and Health and Human Services. The Center aims to bring together faculty who are actively engaged in research and experimental practice in the area of foster care.
Center Director

Yvonne Unrau, Ph.D., Professor of Social Work. Dr. Unrau has worked and studied in the area of foster care since 1989. Her interest in foster care began as a family preservation worker in a Canadian family service agency, where she worked with many children at risk for out-of-home placement. She later worked as a treatment foster care coordinator and then went on to earn her doctorate in Social Work from the University of Utah, which was granted in 1995. Her research has focused primarily on family preservation and foster care services, with particular interest in utilizing data to monitor service delivery for the purposes of improve client outcomes, as well as the service delivery experience. She is co-author and editor of several research and evaluation textbooks, and has several published articles that examine the effectiveness of services for vulnerable children and their families. She is part of the core team at WMU that created the Seita Scholars program, and served as the Founding Director from 2008 to 2011. Dr. Unrau currently oversees the Seita Scholars program, and also leading a statewide collective impact effort funded largely by the Kresge Foundation. The statewide initiative aims to increase awareness and resources for the purposes of increasing the number of foster youth who graduate from college and transition successfully to careers.

Current Staffing for the Seita Scholars Program

- Director (1 FTE): Chris Harris
- Office Associate (1 FTE): Lisa Wales
- Campus Coaches (3 FTE): Kristin Putney, Ronicka Hamilton, Jamie Crandell
- Department of Human Services (DHS) Coaches (2 FTE): Tim Liggins, Holly Barra
- Graduate Assistant

Current Staffing for Teaching and Training Component

- Director (1 FTE): Marguerite Davenport
- Project Assistant (67% FTE): TBD
- Doctoral Associate: TBD

Faculty Interested in the Research Component

Current WMU faculty who have expressed interest in working together on research projects focused on the population of foster youth include:

- Amy Damashek, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology, College of Arts & Sciences
- Richard Oxhandler, Professor, Holistic Health Care, College of Health and Human Services
- James Henry, Ph.D., Professor of Social Work, College of Health and Human Services

Advisory Board

The advisory board will be comprised of 12-15 individuals with expert knowledge of and a keen sense of priority about education, strategic planning, technology, collective impact, professional development,
marketing and the challenges and needs unique to youth in and aging out of foster care. Members will be gleaned from academia, business, legal, finance and foster care arenas throughout the country as well as locally to ensure that our efforts are relevant to locations with very different demographics than those in Kalamazoo and Michigan.

The advisory board will meet several times a year, using web technology to facilitate communication with members who are not local. The advisory board will provide input and guidance for the overall direction of the Center’s activities. Membership will include people who care about foster youth issues and have a wish for the Center to do well.

**Space Needs**

Presently, the Center office space includes office space that is temporarily located on the second floor of the Faunce Student Service Building. The three offices include one office for the center director, one office for the outreach director and one office to be shared by an office assistant and doctoral associate. An additional office will be requested for student employees. The office is expected to move to the third floor of Faunce in May 2012 when Financial Aid relocates. In addition, the Seita Scholars Program, which is located on the ground floor of Faunce occupies 11 offices to house 6 FTE staff, a graduate assistant, a student lounge, a meeting room, and a student study lounge.

A permanent space request for the Center, along with the outreach and research components of the center will be addressed through the University’s space committee. Ideally, all components of the Center (including Seita Scholars, Outreach and Research) will be located in the same building in a shared area.

**Funding Sources**

Funding for the Center and its component parts comes from various sources. For example, the Seita Scholars Program is funded by Academic Affairs and is supplemented by over one million dollars in external gifts and grants. The outreach component of the Center is mostly funded by the recent Kresge award for a three-year period. Academic affairs contributed just over $100,000 to allow 50 percent release time for the center director and a doctoral fellowship. An effort to secure an additional $200,000 in external funds is currently underway by WMU’s Development Office. Any funding for research activity will be secured by competitive research funding.

**Multi-year plan for funding including sources.**

Raising funds for Fostering Success is a priority of WMU’s Development Office. Planning efforts are underway to secure long-term funding for operational, development and scholarships (for Seita scholars and graduate level study). In addition, the Center’s advisory board will be tasked with helping to develop a long-term sustainability plan.
Assessment

Each component of the Center will be assessed using separate measures of success. Both process and outcome measures will be monitored.

Student Support Component (Seita Scholars Program)

- Process measures include: number of hours of direct student support by staff; number of peer leaders trained; number and quality of career mentors established; number of internships; number of students studying abroad.
- Outcome measures include: number of graduates; number of students in degree-related employment.

Teaching & Training Component

- Process measures include: success indicators for developing collective-impact strategy
- Outcomes measures include: increased number of Local College Area Networks (LCANs) with established Student Success Networks (SSNs) for foster youth; increased number of effective on-campus support programs for students emancipating from foster care; and, increased understanding by institutions of higher education about best practices for supporting foster youth on a track to higher education.

Research Component

- Process measures include: number of research proposals submitted
- Outcome measures include: number of research grants secured

Schedule

The three year growth plan for the Center once approved by is as follows:

Year One (2012-13)

1. Establish an advisory board of professionals and foster care alum. Membership to include local regional and national experts.
2. Collaborate with statewide partners to develop the Center’s charter, including establishing the mission and goals.
3. Hire Yvonne Unrau as founding director.
4. Develop a 5 year strategic plan.
5. Create a statewide Foster Youth Advisory Group to include Foster care alum enrolled in Michigan Institutions of higher education.
6. Form a Higher Education Consortium of Michigan Colleges and Universities engaged in the work of supporting foster youth in college.
7. Host statewide meetings on foster youth and higher education to include institutions of higher education, Department of Human Services, Michigan College Access Network and other partner.
8. Create workgroups to be coordinated through the Center with the focus on grant writing for the three components of the center.
9. Develop a plan for permanent office space.
10. Create a website.

Year Two (2013-14)

1. Evaluate progress on the strategic plan.
2. Establish network relationships with organizations and entities focused on foster youth issues, resources and solutions.
3. Create a long-term fund development plan to support planned growth.
4. Create training and curriculum materials.
5. Sponsor webinar training series targeting foster youth needs, challenges, resources and solutions.
6. Apply for research and training grants.

Year Three (2014-15)

1. Evaluate progress on the strategic plan.
2. Establish sound financial plan through a budget protocol, endowment funding, and grants that focus on foster youth in education, social work, juvenile justice and related disciplines.
3. Seek funding for Graduate and Doctoral Assistantships
4. Seek funding for faculty scholar fellowships