LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS

Greetings Friends and Supporters of the Seita Scholars Program,

It has certainly been an unprecedented year for all of us, and in the Seita Scholars Program it meant changing how we do business with our partners and our students. As the Seita Scholars Program navigated COVID-19, we were reminded of our resilience, resourcefulness, and the strength and importance of our community. We also took pause to reflect on our efforts related to racism and social injustice, and how forms of oppression impact our students and staff. In short, the year had many abrupt moments of adaptation, the most significant was the moment in Spring 2020 when the campus had to shift to virtual communication and online learning.

Seita Scholars are not strangers to hardship, and the events of this year were met by most students with grit and grace. The sudden shift to virtual learning provided coaches and students the opportunity to think differently about our work and to meet a new level of mental health stressors associated with isolation and online learning as the only option for classes. Utilizing existing grant funds and donor support, we were able to support Scholars as they experienced unexpected costs associated with job loss and other COVID-19 related challenges amounting to over $60,033.98.

As a team, the coaching staff and student employees continued the traditions of celebrating our Scholars for academic and extra-curricular achievements. This year, an additional 18 Seita Scholars graduated, which brought our number up to 193. Our commitment to research about the students and the program generated new learning this year, and improved ways to approach our work.

In our annual report you will find some highlights of our year. We are spotlighting the kindness of our donors, the ingenuity of our students, and the commitment of our community.

From everyone at the Seita Scholars Program, thank you for being in community with us, for your generous contributions, and for your awareness of others in need.

With much gratitude,

Yvonne Unrau, Ph.D., LMSW
Director, Center for Fostering Success
Professor, School of Social Work

Ronicka D. Hamilton, MA, LLPC, ACC
Director, Seita Scholars Program

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

For the past 13 years, Western Michigan University’s Center for Fostering Success has been transformational in the lives of former foster youth. Our Seita Scholars Program, which includes a scholarship, an on-campus home and campus coaching, is the nation’s most comprehensive collegiate program for enabling foster care alumni to realize their potential. In Michigan alone, 900 young people age out of the state foster care system annually. With limited resources, 20% become homeless and 50% are unemployed at age 21. Estimates show just 20% of foster youth enroll in college compared to 60% of non-foster youth, and they are up to eight times less likely to earn a degree. Three WMU colleagues – Yvonne Unrau, Penny Bundy, and Mark Delorey – conceived the program following a talk by Dr. John Seita. A product of Michigan’s foster care system himself, Dr. Seita had earned three degrees at WMU has become a champion for former foster care youth. He recounted his own financial and emotional struggles as a student, having no family or home to turn to. He told of living in his car when campus housing closed for holiday breaks. Most importantly, he showed what young people can achieve when given opportunity and support. The 2008 launch of the Seita Scholars Program started with 51 students, and now serves 105 Broncos fully integrated into college life and on clear paths to academic and career success. WMU’s investment is showing promising results, and we look forward to continuing our commitment.

The Seita Scholars Program is designed to address the academic gaps and needs that many youth who experienced foster care encounter. This support was even more essential during COVID-19 as 66% of Seita Scholars remained in on-campus housing throughout the early stages of the pandemic. Among these program supports are:

- Scholarships to undergraduate students who experienced foster care and are attending Western Michigan University
- 4 Campus Coaches (24 hour on call support, meeting student needs at locations and times that are convenient to the student)
- Access to additional financial supports for youth who experienced foster care (e.g. the Education and Training Voucher, Michigan Education Trust Fostering Futures scholarships, Youth in Transition funds, and more)
- Support with other systems (e.g., courts, human services, Medicaid, public assistance)
- Graduation preparation assistance (Graduation Preparation Seminars moved to virtual)
- Year-round campus housing
- Financial aid and financial planning assistance
- Academic assessment, support, and monitoring (moved our processes to fully electronic)
- Emergency funding support
2020–21 COHORT

SEITA SCHOLARS BY THE NUMBERS

At the conclusion of the Summer I 2021 semester, the Seita Scholars Program has 193 graduates of Western Michigan University, with 1 additional Seita Scholar graduating from another institution. This brings the graduation rate of Seita Scholars far above the national average for youth who experienced foster care.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

The Seita Scholars Program is a learner-centered program that encourages students to achieve academically, while also taking advantage of all opportunities that Western Michigan University has to offer, such as internships and study abroad experiences. Despite the shift to virtual learning and the associated challenges, students continued to make academic strides. Below are some academic and professional highlights of the Seita Scholars Program in the 2020-21 school year:

- A former Seita Scholar was hired with the program to fill the role of part-time Transition Coordinator
- 82% of Seita Scholars remained engaged in virtual coaching during this period of the pandemic, thus meeting with their campus coaches regularly
- 27% of Seita Scholars earned Dean’s List status
- 23% of Seita Scholars earned between 3.0-3.49
- 8% of Seita Scholars participated in an internship

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 study abroad opportunities were not available. However, it is encouraging to see the resilience and dedication Seita Scholars have demonstrated during the pandemic, and their commitment to their academic goals.

COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS

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ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

We are delighted to highlight Justin & Alexis Black. Both are recent graduates of Western Michigan University and alumni of the Seita Scholars Program. Both have served as National Youth and Transition Database Reviewers while also fundraising for programs that support foster youth such as Nsoro and hope pkgs. Together, they’ve published a bestselling book titled Redefining Normal: How Two Foster Kids Beat The Odds and Discovered Healing, Happiness and Love for has impacted over 10,000 individuals and families while winning seven book awards. With ROSE (Rising Over Societal Expectations) Empowerment Group and Redefining Normal, they hope to continue the conversation on healthy relationships, mental health, and healing through speaking engagements, trainings and book clubs. The Seita Scholars Program is so proud of Justin and Alexis and the impact they are having on the foster care system.

We are thrilled to highlight the work of Bella Hounakey, Seita Scholar class of 2015. Bella double majored in criminal justice and Spanish, and then went on to earn a master’s degree in social work. This exceptional alumna has turned her personal pain into a purpose-driven life devoted to being an advocate for refugee and foster care children, particularly in the field of human trafficking. By 14 she was starting over in Michigan in the foster care system; “I was highly thankful for the people of Michigan, because for the first time there were people that helped me without condition,” and chose Western Michigan University in large part because of the community and support offered by the Seita Scholars Program. Bella recently completed a two-year appointment to the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. Nomi Network, a nonprofit organization focused on eradicating modern slavery, presented Bella with its 2020 Abolitionist Award. She is currently a Program Specialist at the US Department of Health and Human Services where she works on behalf of unaccompanied children in the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The Seita Scholars Program could not be more proud of Bella and we are so thankful for her trust in us and the difference that she is making in the world.

GENEROSITY OF DONORS

We cannot begin to express our sincere gratitude for all our generous donors have provided for our Scholars. In addition to the community, the financial support, and acceptance & belonging that the Seita Scholars receive, donor giving is unmatched. During these unprecedented times, when nothing was guaranteed especially for a group of young adults who have already experienced tumult, the Seita Scholars program has been a bedrock. Keeping the program afloat was no easy task; however, our staff was dedicated and encouraged by the consistency and generosity of our donors. Our students showed tenacity, resiliency and resolve because of the assuredness our donors provided. At the onset of COVID-19, when everything changed drastically around us, our donors were a mainstay.

Thanks to our donors, we were able to utilize over $60,033.98 of donated funds, welcome pack donations, and holiday gift bags to continue supporting Seita Scholars with confidence and stability in uncertain times. The funds supported students with rent, groceries, and other emergency & unmet needs including car insurance, cell phone bills, and other essential needs. We asked a few of our donor why they give to the Seita Scholars Program and here’s what they said:

"We give because WMU is my alma mater and we value education. We give specifically to the Seita Scholars Program because the work they do aligns with who we are as a family."  
Ikram & Monica Rashid and Family  
WMU '01 and '02

"The members of AFSCME Local 1668 at WMU have proudly supported the Seita Scholars Program since its very beginning. We do so because we believe that every student coming to Western should have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their life story before arriving here."  
Bryan Sutton, President  
AFSCME Local 1668

"I first learned about Seita Scholars in 2016 while attending a friend’s graduation from WMU. I was inspired by the students in the program. So when I was hired in 2018 I was committed to supporting this program in any way I could. Often times society assumes if you have a certain background your accomplishments are limited but the Seita Scholars refuse to adhere to that assumption and are limitless."  
Candy McCorkle, PH.D.  
Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion  
Western Michigan University

Again, thank you to each of our donors. It is because of you, your thoughtfulness, and generosity, that we can serve and support Scholars in achieving their goals and aspirations.

"Ask for what you want and be prepared to get it." — Maya Angelou
RESEARCH CORNER

This year marks the completion of a multi-year formative evaluation of the Seita Scholars program; an independent effort, completed by the University of Chicago, Center for Children and the Urban Institute. The research report (https://www.chapinhall.org/research/formative-report-seita/) endorsed the coaching model developed in the Seita Scholars program by stating: “Program developers should consider incorporating coaching into college success programs using a model like Fostering Success Coaching, which focuses not only on education, but on a range of life domains.” Yvonne Unrau and Ronicka Hamilton participated in the presentation of the findings here: https://www.urban.org/events/college-success-evaluating-seita-scholars-program. In addition, we have supported a variety of research projects.

Highlights include:

1. A multi-phase study exploring the social networks and social capital among a sample of first-year college students with foster care histories who were participating in a campus-based support program by Lori Gray, Ph.D., (WMU) and Nate Okpych, Ph.D. (U Conn) https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-021-09553-x.


3. A mixed-methods study exploring what factors are related to students’ with foster care histories stopping out of university? by Bridget E. Weller, Ph.D., (WMU) and Royel Johnson, Ph.D. (Penn State) Developing strategies and resources that support each of our students to find and follow their inner compass and benefit fully from their college education to enjoy a fulfilling life.

4. A literature review focused on providing campus support to LGBTQ students with a history of foster care by Melinda McCormick, Ph.D., Jonathan Anthony, MSW, E.T. Townsend (MSW Student).

5. A qualitative study exploring the perceptions of well-being among college students with a history of foster care by Yvonne Unrau, Ph.D., and Melinda McCormick, Ph.D.

“Program developers should consider incorporating coaching into college success programs using a model like Fostering Success Coaching, which focuses not only on education, but on a range of life domains.”

— University of Chicago, Center for Children and the Urban Institute

RACIAL & SOCIAL JUSTICE

By learning about and with those who are most impacted by the harsh injustices and inequalities present this year, in addition to the challenges of COVID-19, we have also been reflecting on ways to strengthen staff awareness around individual, institutional, and systemic inequality. With this in mind, throughout the year 62% of our staff participated in Racial Healing Allies - a signature approach that fosters a movement of allies contributing to the global healing needed for all of humanity to prosper. Staff members were able to learn more about, and safely explore, the systemic nature of racial oppression, and develop language to better engage in conversations about race.

Meanwhile, 100% of our staff participated in Eliminating Racism & Creating/Celebrating Equity (ERACCE) - 2 half day workshops. ERACCE exists to eliminate structural racism and create a network of equitable antiracist institutions and communities. We invite you to stay tuned and watch for our progress over the year as we proceed with continued reflection and great intention.
THANK YOU TO OUR 2020-21 DONORS

AFSCME Local 1668
Almena United Methodist Church
Alzheimer’s Association of Michigan
Sue Arbogast
Carroll Barnum
Boy’s and Girls Club of Kalamazoo
Local 1668
James Chabin
Kathy Davis
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John and Linda Dunn Endowment
Kalamazoo County Association of Retired Personnel
Kalamazoo Log Cabin Quilters
Kathie Davis
John and Linda Dunn Endowment
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THANK YOU TO OUR 2020-21 DONORS

DONOR FUNDING ALLOCATION

Essential Needs 74%
Housing 11%
Tutoring 1%
Insurance 2%
Utilities 1%
Medical Bills 11%

SEE YOU NEXT YEAR!
Seita Scholars Program

www.wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess