

From Foster Care to College: The Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University

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Youth from the foster care system discover new opportunities in a challenging and supportive college setting. One young scholar describes the experience as “pushing the limits and daring to be what I dare to dream!”

More than 32,000 young people in the United States exit the foster care system in a typical year by aging out to independence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Most youth leaving foster care at 18 years old do so in unplanned ways, and many either return to families that were judged unfit by the court or live on their own (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Just over half of foster youth complete high

school and fewer than 20 percent take college-prep courses in high school (Casey Family Programs, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Despite available financial support for post-secondary education through the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, only 20 percent of college-qualified foster youth attend college and less than 5 percent complete a degree; these rates are far lower than the general population with



60 percent enrollment and 24 percent degree-completion rates (Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005).

There are many barriers that get in the way of foster youth's success in college. Many foster youth face practical or system barriers that make it difficult to access or stay in school after aging out of foster care. For example, a study by Pecora and his colleagues (2006) estimated less than one-third of youth exiting foster care have basic resources such as a driver's license, cash, or basic household necessities. Most foster youth do not have someone to co-sign a loan or lease, making it difficult to secure safe housing. Medicaid and funds for start-up goods are available to foster youth until age 21, but youth do not learn planning and communication skills needed to successfully navigate the large bureaucratic system before aging out of foster care (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap (2010) found that the main barriers for higher education access among foster youth were a lack of financial resources, the need to be in full-time employment, parenting responsibilities, and a lack of transportation.

Colleges and universities are starting to take notice of foster youth as an underserved student population, and campus support programs designed to provide financial, academic, and other supports to students who have aged out of foster care are increasing (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Dworsky & Perez, 2010). One such program is the Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University. The program was named to honor Dr. John Seita who is an alum of Western Michigan University as well as Michigan's foster care system. He has dedicated his life to teaching and training future social workers about the challenges and strengths of young people who are aging out of the foster care system, and he is an inspiration to young people living in foster care.

The Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University (WMU)

The Seita Scholars Program was designed using the *Supporting Success* guide published by Casey Family Programs (2010). The overall goal of the Seita Scholars Program is to increase opportunities for young people who have aged out of foster care to pursue higher education and to provide supports that promote success and well-being throughout the undergraduate

experience at WMU. The program aims to create a community of scholars among former foster youth. More than providing students with undergraduate education, the program offers individual and system change strategies to help former foster youth transition into adulthood through the experience of higher education. Students begin their college journey at WMU with a fresh start because their foster care case history information is not reviewed by program staff. Moreover, students are invited to actively give input into programming activities and participate in program planning decisions.

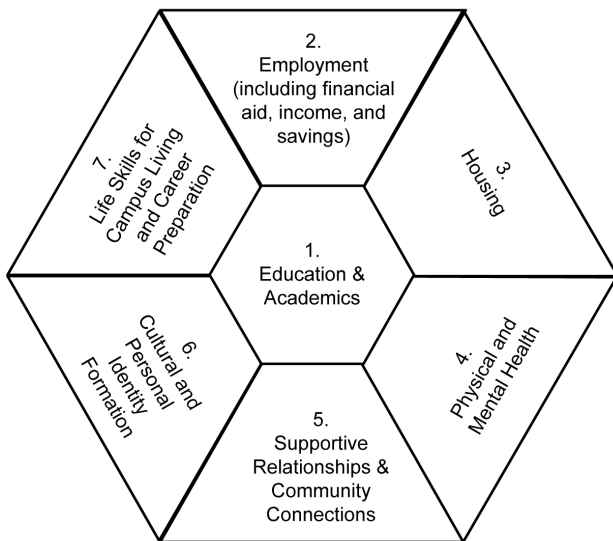
Students accepted to the program are known as Seita Scholars; they receive a tuition scholarship that, when combined with financial aid and other state funds for foster youth, makes it possible for them to attend college with minimal to no student loans.

A coaching model is used as the main approach to student support. Seita Scholars are assigned a Campus Coach, a masters-level professional with foster care experience who helps students navigate campus and tackle the challenges of higher education. Campus Coaches communicate with students via texting, email, phone, and face-to-face meetings. They offer personalized support to fill gaps and bolster strengths for each student. Campus coaches are accessible 24 hours per day via on-call support, and students are taught how to use after-hour support for emergencies and to schedule appointments for non-emergencies. A Department of Human Service (DHS) Coach is also on staff at the university to help students with matters of foster care, Medicaid, Community Mental Health, and other public support services such as food stamps and daycare.

Campus and DHS coaches are all trained to support students across seven lifespan developmental domains that have been identified as important for transitioning out of foster care: education and academics, finances and employment, housing, physical and mental health, social relationships and community connections, personal and cultural identity, and life skills (Casey Family Programs, 2006). These seven domains are depicted in Figure 1 in a way that illustrates that academics is the central focus, but other life domains are closely tied to students' educational experiences and achievement. Furthermore, coaches support students in ways that promote self-sufficiency for long-term educational success and career preparation.

Colleges and universities are starting to take notice of foster youth as an underserved student population.

Figure 1



The Seita Scholars Program began in the fall of 2008 and has enrolled an average of 50 students per year. The program's third-semester retention rate (i.e., students return to school in the fall of their second year) is now over 80 percent, which means that the majority of Seita Scholars are well on their way to earning a college degree. The opportunity for foster youth to be part of a community of former foster youth on their college campus reduces feelings of isolation and separateness. Seita Scholars have access to coach support around the clock. The scholars are always welcome to drop in at the office and each staff member knows every student by name. This open access to personal support increases feelings of security that students can manage everyday challenges of college and campus life, as well as the additional struggles related to their specific foster care experiences. Foster care related struggles include but are not limited to: biological family relationships, concern for siblings adopted or in foster care, death or violence of loved ones, coping with mental health diagnoses and childhood trauma, unaddressed dental problems, and chronic health problems and coordinating health insurance coverage.

Offering campus-based support services to students from foster care attending college is a strategy to level the playing field so that foster youth can have a fair chance at competing for internships, scholarships, and other career advancing opportunities common in the college environment. It also gives former foster youth the opportunity to fully engage in college life. Such programs attempt to fill the family privilege gap, which disadvantages fos-

ter youth in social, political, and economic arenas (Seita, 2001). Coaching support helps Seita Scholars to find balance in the seven life domains (see Figure 1), giving them more opportunity to join their peers in campus activities, participate in student organizations, and try out new and novel experiences available on campus.

Student-Centered Program Planning

Seita Scholars are viewed by program staff as experts in the lived experience of foster care. Scholars are invited to use their expertise by giving input to program planning and activities in several ways. Scholars employed as peer leaders help co-teach "University 101" courses exclusive to students from foster care. Students on campus have an official student organization called Foster Youth and Higher Education, which gives voice to foster care issues on campus. Town hall meetings are held monthly where Seita Scholars meet with the program director to give feedback about their experiences on campus and with the program. On regular occasions, students are invited to express their feelings about the program in a public way. Below is a list of responses given by 24 Seita Scholars from the 2010 class who were asked to complete the following statement about the program at a university function: "Being a Seita Scholar at Western Michigan University to me, means..."

...that I am a role model and that everything in my life before this I have conquered.

...making my dreams become a reality.

...the opportunity to reach my full potential.

...connecting with college kids like me and being a part of a support group.

...an opportunity of a life time. I am truly grateful.

...becoming a leader, a role model, and to want more in life for myself.

...everything.

...that I've been given the chance of a lifetime.

...a lot, because not very many people get this opportunity.

...that I may have been through some hard times, but I made it to my goal of college.

...that I have the ability to achieve any goal I set for myself, and knowing that I have people behind me to help me.

...that I am not alone. I have peers that I can relate to and get support from.

...getting ahead in life and being successful at conquering my goal.

...a chance at a better future, without it I never would have been going to college.

...a jump start to my future in a positive way.

...to be a part of a really smart and resourceful family.

...I was given a chance to succeed.

...my future has a brighter outlook, more than it ever could have.

...that I have an opportunity to be what I want to be in life.

...to have all the support I need to be successful; and to raise the statistics of former foster care kids that finish college.

...that whatever you thought I couldn't do, I did. I will be more than they believed!

...a chance to live my life, and to find out who I am.

...a great opportunity to even bigger opportunities.

...means pushing the limits and daring to be what I dare to dream!

Conclusion

America's young adults who grow up in foster care until the age of majority (typically 18 years old) are among the most disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for personal achievement and well-being in the nation. They are more likely than other young adults to experience unemployment, homelessness, and poverty and are less likely to graduate high school or attend college. Yet, the majority of foster youth desire to go to college. College and universities need to join with child welfare agencies to help support foster youth to access and succeed in college.

Campus-based programs, such as the Seita Scholars Program, that are designed to support foster youth in higher education are growing. These programs help to level the playing field so that foster youth, like their college peers, can benefit from career-enhancing opportunities typically available on college campuses and realize their dreams for a better future.

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Page 17 photo: WMU President John Dunn & Dr. John Seita with Seita Scholars. Used with permission.

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