

Program Title: Seita Scholars Program
Institution: Western Michigan University
Innovation Category: College Access and Outreach, Retention/Completion, Underserved Populations
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Project Description:

Western Michigan University (WMU) is a public institution that provides leadership in teaching, research, learning, and service. The university is committed to enhancing the future of our global citizenry and invests in defined groups of students to make these efforts come alive. One such group is young people who have been emancipated from foster care. These students “age out” of foster care and “age into” higher education, are unique in their demographic make-up, and are typically academically less prepared compared to the general undergraduate population. A history of child abuse and neglect, along with the challenges associated with the foster care system, decreases their odds of college access and success. The WMU community has wholeheartedly invested in researching, learning and serving students from foster care through the Seita Scholars program, which offers a scholarship in conjunction with a life coach training model that addresses the complex challenges faced by students who have suffered through child abuse and endured the trials of growing up in foster care.

The program efforts are working with demonstrated progress in areas of college access, retention, engagement and undergraduate degree completion. The core program budget grew from \$0 in 2007 to annual university-budgeted support of \$1.65 million in scholarships and over \$500,000 in operational costs. Additionally, two full-time Michigan Department of Health and Human Service (DHHS) employees are embedded in the program and located on campus. A WMU faculty member has led the program’s creation and development, and continues to provide program oversight and supervision. The program director is a permanent staff member who reports directly to the Office of Academic Affairs. The program has positively influenced student support practices at WMU as well as other institutions of higher education seeking to offer similar support to students from foster care.

Project Objectives:

One of the main goals of the program is to create transitions that lead to success in college and career for Western Michigan University students from foster care ages 18 to 25 years old. Points of transition that are monitored include:

- (a) Access – the number of students from foster care (i.e., Seita Scholars) enrolled at WMU
- (b) Retention – third-semester retention rate of Seita Scholars
- (c) Engagement – a number of engagement metrics (e.g., course withdrawals, GPA) are monitored as proxy measures of how well Seita Scholars are engaged in their academic and college endeavors.

(d) Graduation – the number of Seita Scholars earning a Baccalaureate degree.

Target Population:

The Seita Scholars program is designed to support students who are or have been in an eligible foster care placement, on or after their 14th birthday, through the State of Michigan. Students must be admitted to WMU as a freshman or transfer student and be between the ages of 17 and 25 years old at the time of admission.

Quantifiable/Qualifiable Outcomes:

WMU's investment in the Seita Scholars program is showing promising results with respect to improving college success rates among Michigan's population of foster youth. Results of the program are highlighted according to the four outcome areas mentioned above: access, engagement, retention and graduation.

- a) **Access.** The creation of the Seita Scholars program in 2008 has positively influenced enrollment in college among youth in Michigan's foster care system. Specifically, the program has increased representation of students from foster care on WMU's campus from less than .01% (i.e., n=12 students) of the undergraduate population in 2007 to .08% (i.e., n>110 students) in the past several years. It is estimated that 1 to 5% of children in the general population have experienced foster care¹.
- b) **Retention.** The Seita Scholars program shows promising trends at stabilizing 3rd semester retention. In the first year (fall 2008) of the program only 46% of Seita Scholars returned to WMU for a 2nd year, which was significantly less than the 72% retention rate of other first-time-in-any-college (FTIAC) students who were not Seita Scholars. Informed by lessons of the program's inaugural year, several program changes were made and formalized, which included a staff ratio of 1 campus coach (staff) to 25 students, assigning program office space, and allocating a permanent budget for program operations. In subsequent years, retention rates for Seita Scholars leveled out to more closely match rates of the general FTIAC population at WMU.
- c) **Engagement.** The Seita Scholars program monitors a variety of "engagement metrics" to assess how well students from foster care are making progress toward graduation. Any observed gaps on indicators between Seita Scholars and other students within the FTIAC population are examined and targeted for improvement. Two examples of positive change engagement metrics are (1) course withdrawals, which is a risk factor that negatively impacts Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements and eligibility for future financial aid, and (2) GPA, which is a qualifier for many other campus opportunities including employment, acceptance to a major, or special programs such as study abroad. Outcome data for course withdrawals show that Seita Scholars dropped courses almost twice as often as their FTIAC peers in the first four years of the program. However, course withdrawals among Seita Scholars improved to more closely match levels by other FTIAC students after coaching support was formalized, which included both academic incentives and a process for students to proactively plan course withdrawal when necessary. Similarly, outcome data that monitor GPA achievement show that despite constancy in admission metrics, Seita Scholars first semester GPA's are approaching that of their FTIAC peers over time.
- d) **Graduation.** When FTIAC and transfer students are combined, the graduation rate of Seita Scholars is near 50%. However, the program measures progress by comparing

¹ O'Hare, W.P. (2008). *Data on children in foster care from the Census Bureau*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

achievement of its FTIAC students with the general FTIAC population at WMU. On this score, the Seita Scholars program shows promising progress toward degree completion benchmarks. Currently, the program works to narrow the 4-year and 6-year graduation gaps between Seita Scholar and other FTIAC degree completion, which are 8% vs 22% and 30% vs 50%, respectively. However, graduation rates of 30% (for FTIAC Seita Scholars) and 50% (for all Seita Scholars) far exceeds the national estimate that less than 5% of young people from foster care earn a baccalaureate degree in six years.

In addition to graduation metrics, the Seita Scholars program routinely gathers feedback from the students to learn about both challenges and innovations related to advancing towards earning a Baccalaureate degree. In a recent survey, all Seita Scholars perceived the program as important to their success, and 77% indicated they would not be successful at college without it². The top three factors identified by students as being the “biggest help to being successful at WMU” were the scholarship support, the program in its entirety and the campus coaches. The program provides students a positive identity with and a sense of belonging (i.e., having a rightful place) on campus.

Challenges/Problems Encountered:

A first challenge in this effort was to identify students who have aged out of foster care. At WMU, we recognized that young people aging out of foster care was a hidden population. The silent national crisis came to our attention in 2007 when the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) put out a call for action and revealed that young people were leaving foster care only to encounter further hardships leading to negative outcomes such as homelessness, unemployment, incarceration and early parenting. Increasing awareness about this population and the obstacles preventing them from accessing and succeeding in higher education involved targeting key stakeholder groups including: senior university administrators, academic and student affairs departments, as well as logistical departments on campus. Off campus, the key stakeholder group was the Michigan DHHS. Early buy-in for all stakeholder groups was accomplished mainly through presentation and planning meetings, all of which integrated the voices of students who transitioned to college from foster care. Other major challenges include system barriers that exist between university departments, Michigan DHHS and Medicaid. For example, timing and processing of paperwork for students to obtain available state funding to support them in college do not align with university deadlines. Similarly, many challenges exist with maintaining students’ health benefits, as well as continuation of other state-supported benefits from having been in foster care. Most system barriers are tied to the transfer of financial benefits available to students. Consequently, program efforts require strong relationships and routine communication between the university and our DHHS partner.

Evaluation Approach:

The Seita Scholars program devised an evaluation plan that incorporates institutional data to monitor student outcomes. The main objective described above includes key measures (i.e., access, retention, engagement, graduation) in the program’s overall evaluation plan, and to provide a source of data independent from program personnel. Furthermore, the evaluation plan integrates meaningful comparison with the larger FTIAC population enrolled in the university. The program director is responsible for reviewing and reporting annual outcome data for the program, as well as other measures included in the evaluation plan. For example,

² Unrau, Y.A, Dawson, A., Hamilton, R.D., & Bennett, J.L. (2017). Perceived value of a campus-based college support program by students who aged out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 78, 64-73.

the program director routinely monitors data that measure staff contact with individual students (i.e., frequency, type, purpose of contact) and reviews these data with staff coaches. Other evaluation efforts include targeted research projects that are conducted, coordinated or supported by the faculty member who has oversight of the program.

Value Proposition, Financing Strategy and Return-On-Investment Indicators:

WMU has integrated the Seita Scholars program into the university's culture, programming, and base budget. The major initial financial investment in the program was approximately \$500,000 in tuition scholarships, which were allocated from WMU's financial aid budget. A social work professor, along with the university's directors of financial aid and admissions championed early program efforts, dedicating significant human resource time. As the program grew, the university increased the total scholarship allocation and added a program budget for staff and operational costs. A significant portion of start-up costs were secured by over \$1,500,000 in gifts from major philanthropic foundations and a one-time allocation of state funding. Today, the program reports directly to the Provost and is supervised by a faculty member and staffed by a team consisting of seven full-time employees (FTE) from WMU and two FTEs from the Michigan DHHS. Student employees round out the staff team, and all work together in a dedicated office setting that is especially welcoming to Seita Scholars. Since 2012, WMU has committed \$1.6 million for scholarships and more than \$500,000 for program operations, annually. The offices of development and government relations are engaged in continual efforts to secure philanthropic and public funds, respectively, to strengthen the long-term financial stability for the program.

Potential for Replication:

Building a sense of belonging on campus for young people aging out of foster care requires both a knowledge of best practices, as well as a personal touch by each institution. For this reason, WMU has endeavored to share program information, as well as promote replication efforts that aids other colleges to build capacity using a "best-practice, best-fit" model to serve students with a history of foster care on their campuses. In sum, we created two additional programs to assist with replication efforts. The first is Fostering Success Michigan (FSM), which is a statewide outreach program that aims to build networks among people and cross-sector organizations that are working to improve educational and career outcomes for Michigan's youth and young adults from foster care. FSM was created, developed and operated at WMU from 2012 to 2018. During it's time at WMU, the program identified 65 financial aid champions (i.e., financial aid staff who were informed about financial aid for students with foster care histories) serving 59% of Michigan colleges and universities, and nurtured the growth of college-based programs for students from foster care from 5 institutions in 2012 to 18 institutions in 2018. The FSM program was transferred to a nonprofit organization in December 2018, and the program continues to thrive in its new organizational home. The second supporting initiative is Fostering Success Coach Training, which was launched in 2013, and prepares professionals to effectively support college students who have experienced foster care or have lived through other adverse childhood experiences. Developed in the Seita Scholars program, the coaching training is a revenue-generating unit and has been offered at universities across the U.S. The training program has been well-received by advisors at WMU who serve the general student population. Since 2013, over 300 professionals from more than 11 states have been trained in the coaching model. Individuals participating in the training include the majority of staff working in campus-based programs at other Michigan colleges and universities.

Vendor Involvement:

Not applicable.

Requisite Program Manager Competencies:

The leadership of the program necessarily must possess a wide range of competencies, with an ability to easily shift from task-focused to relationship-focused demands. An execution- and results-oriented leader is essential because of the many levels of demand required, such as fundraising, communication with senior leadership at the university, troubleshooting administrative support, reporting program metrics, collaborating with non-university partners, supervising front-line staff, responding to student crises, and nurturing a welcoming place for students 365 days per year. The program's leadership must be financially skilled and able to align resources to accomplish the program's goals, possess a high level of emotional skills and intelligence, and be able to think strategically. The adverse impacts of childhood abuse, neglect and trauma necessarily requires that program administration must have capacity to metabolize the "heavy weight" of mental health, system and societal challenges that students from foster care face while supporting staff and encouraging program partners to provide only the highest standards of service. Leadership that builds and nurtures community, integrates students into key decision-making roles, champions a better future for young people leaving foster care, and is strong enough to express vulnerability and compassion are key.

Additional Resources:

Published articles about the Seita Scholars program:

<https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/news/resources/reports>

News and Media Reports about the Seita Scholars program:

<https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/media>

Fostering Success Coach Training:

<https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/outreach/training>

or <https://www.fosteringsuccesscoaching.com/>

Fostering Success Michigan:

<http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/>

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