



~ Fostering success for Michigan's youth and alumni of foster care ~

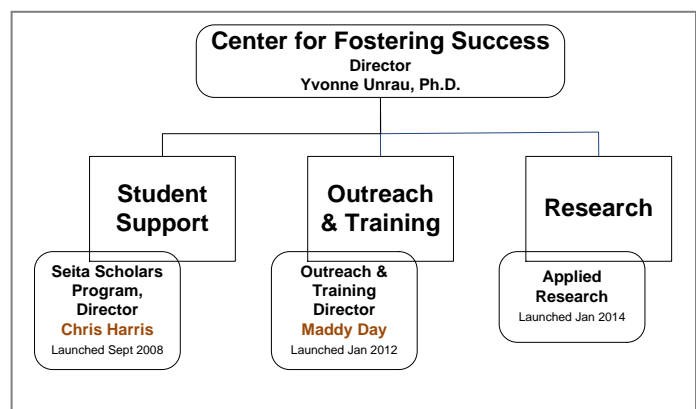
Helping Youth Aging Out of Foster Care and into College

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 alumni of foster care between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, the prime college-going age. Because of their independent status and experiences related to abuse, neglect and growing up in foster care, these youth remain dismally underrepresented on college campuses and as college graduates. Research estimates that 70 percent of youth in foster care desire to go to college¹. Only about 20% of college-qualified foster youth enroll, compared to 60 percent of youth not from foster care; and, without support, approximately 3 percent of foster youth earn a college degree by 26 years of age, compared to 24 percent of youth not from foster care². Without a trajectory to college, alumni of care face harsh realities of unemployment, homelessness and incarceration in their young adult years and are unable to break cycles of abuse, neglect and poverty.

Western Michigan University Cares About Foster Youth

In fall 2008, Western Michigan University (WMU) joined a national movement to support young people aging out of foster care and into higher education by launching a campus-based support effort. Today, the Center for Fostering Success is leading the way in Michigan and joining both state and national partners to improve access and success for foster youth in higher education and degree-related careers. **The Center is comprised of three components** as shown in the figure on the right.

1. **Student Support.** With the support of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and others, WMU aids enrolled students from foster care through the Seita Scholars program. The program has grown the number of foster youth on campus from 12 in spring 2007 to 160 in fall 2013. The third-semester retention rate for students in the program averages over 70 percent,



¹ Courtney, M. E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago: Chaplin Hall at the University of Chicago, 1-61.

² Wolonin, T. (2005). *Higher education opportunities for foster youth: A primer for policy makers*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education.

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 includes tuition scholarships, 24-hour support from Campus Coaches, leadership opportunities, career mentors, key life skills and other transformative strategies of support.

2. **Outreach and Training.** With the support of the Kresge Foundation and other organizations, WMU has launched *Fostering Success Michigan*, an initiative that focuses on building a statewide cross-sector network to support students from foster care in colleges and universities across the Michigan. The effort focuses on making connections between people who are working to improve educational and career outcomes for Michigan's students from foster care between the ages of 12 to 25 years old. The focus is not only to access and earn a college degree, but also to transform lives through the college experience and successfully start a professional career. To date, there are 10 Michigan institutions of higher education that are active members of the network.
3. **Applied Research.** The research component of the Center is in development. The focus is on informing *best practice* to advance youth from foster care through education and to career. Research is undertaken with the understanding that there is no “one size fits all” solution for youth aging out of foster care; and, as such, a secondary focus on *best fit*— what works to impact youth on various colleges campuses—is a priority principle for knowledge development and dissemination. Center research activity aims to contribute to understanding how communities can promote healthy transitions that support educational and career goals of young people growing up in foster care.

Mission and Goals of the Center for Fostering Success

The **mission** of the Center for Fostering Success is to improve college graduation and career achievement rates among youth and young adults (12 to 25 years old) aging out of the foster care system. The **goals** of the Center are to:

- **Create** successful transitions from foster care-to-college and college-to-career for students ages 12 to 25 through the experience of higher education.
- **Educate** the community in the college-to-career pipeline about the needs, challenges, and discovery-driven solutions related to students from foster care.
- **Develop** leaders among alumni of foster care to enhance the greater community and society.
- **Connect** strong and enduring networks addressing needs of youth and alumni of foster care in relation to higher education and career.
- **Sustain** the backbone structure of the Center for Fostering Success to support the above goals.

Contacts

- Yvonne Unrau, Ph.D. Director, Center for Fostering Success
Yvonne.Unrau@wmich.edu / 269-929-0613
- Chris Harris, MHRD, Director Seita Scholars Program
Chris.Harris@wmich.edu / 269-387-8346
- Maddy Day, MSW. Director, Outreach & Training
Maddy.Day@wmich.edu /269-568-9142

Last revised 8/13/2013