The road to college wasn’t an easy one for J. Gabriel Ware. Having been in foster care since the age of one, he faced several challenges from an early age. It was these challenges, coupled with his underwhelming performance in school, that made it seem like higher education was out of reach. “I was a horrible student in school, to be honest with you,” he said.

Students like Ware are the reason that Western Michigan University established its Seita Scholars program in 2008. The innovative program is a comprehensive support system that helps young adults who have aged out of the foster care system in the state of Michigan. Scholars of the program receive a scholarship, year-round on-campus housing, and one-on-one campus coaching for academic and personal support throughout their collegiate career.

Because of his high school grades, Ware began his collegiate journey in community college. It was at that time that he first learned of the Seita program from one of his former caseworkers. After earning his associate’s degree, he applied and was accepted into the program.

Before attending Western Michigan, Ware had to work several jobs to make ends meet while in community college. With the Seita program’s financial aid — which covers everything — he was able to advance past entry-level retail jobs as a student at WMU.

“When you work two to three jobs to get through school, you don’t get jobs to help advance your career,” he said.

Because of the Seita program, he was able to accept a six-month unpaid scholarship at a magazine in Washington, D.C., and earned a spot in a New York Times student journalism institute.

The opportunity and chance at success afforded to Ware, and students like him, through the Seita program is why Phi Kappa Phi awarded its Excellence in Innovation to Western Michigan in May 2018. The $100,000 prize is given to an institution for achievement in finding powerful solutions to important challenges through innovation in higher education.

“By lifting up an underrepresented population — young people who have aged out of foster care — the university has transformed lives and offered hope to individuals who may never have dreamed a college degree was within reach,” Society Executive Director Mary Todd said.

Edward B. Montgomery, president of Western Michigan, accepted the award on behalf of the university at Phi Kappa Phi’s 2018 convention in Minneapolis. During his acceptance, Montgomery said one of the best parts of being president is going to commencements.

“You get to see people and families who are filled with joy at what they’ve accomplished and what they’ve overcome,” Montgomery said. “If you ever get cynical about why we’re in the higher education business, sit back and watch graduation.”

The Seita program, he said, is an incredible journey for students who had no pathway forward in life. Since its inception, it has graduated more than 140 students, many of whom have gone on to graduate school and medical school.

And Ware is one of those students. Because he was dual enrolled his senior year at Western Michigan, the Seita program was able to pay for part of his master’s degree, too.

“This is a great program, and I’m proud to be a part of it,” Ware said.
The Seita program is an incredible journey for students who had no pathway forward in life. Since its inception, it has graduated more than 140 students, many of whom have gone on to graduate school and medical school.