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Why WKU's dropping ACT as standard for scholarships

Column by TIMOTHY C. CABONI 21 hrs ago

Last month, I announced aggressive changes to Western Kentucky University's scholarship program, which will nearly double the percentage of our incoming freshman class receiving some type of institutional award.

We are recognizing students' sustained academic success by basing most of our merit-based and targeted academic scholarships on high school grade-point average and removing the ACT component.

We also have increased the minimum scholarship award from $1,500 to $2,500 while lowering the minimum unweighted GPA from 3.3 to 3.0. And, we created additional scholarship opportunities for underrepresented minority students through an expansion of the Cornelius A. Martin Scholarship.

Why? Every fall we admit thousands of students to WKU who otherwise would not attend college anywhere. In fact, of the students admitted to the incoming fall 2018 class, 52 percent chose not to attend college anywhere and we know the primary reason was cost.

At WKU, we are putting action behind our claim of being an institution of access and opportunity.

This additional investment is our commitment to our 27-county service region and beyond to partner with families and help ease financial concerns while making a WKU experience more affordable.

We also know high school GPA is one of the best predictors of a student's future success. GPA measures sustained achievement over four years rather than performance on a single test.

The ACT still is important and will remain part of admissions criteria and a factor in our top merit-based scholarships, but these scores often can keep a good student from qualifying for any scholarship.

These bold changes represent an additional $5.2 million investment in our students – an approximate 20 percent increase from last year.

So why not just cut tuition? Because we want to incentivize students to aspire to do well in high school. If they know a 3.0 will get them a scholarship to WKU and a higher GPA will equal a larger scholarship, then they have even more reason to work hard.

And it is about more than just the students. When they earn that scholarship based on their GPA, WKU invests in them and shows them we believe they can be successful. By increasing our financial partnership with them, we are signaling to students and families we will do everything we can to make sure they are successful, including letting them focus more on earning their degree and less on paying for college.

WKU takes pride in being a student-centered university. By being student centered, we help our students graduate on time and give them the

opportunity to mature academically, socially and personally. Our students are ready to become part of their community, which elevates our region and beyond.

Since the announcement, we've been asked how we can afford this in an era of lean budgets and other financial pressures. I say we cannot afford to not do it.

By being aggressive with our scholarship offerings, we not only increase student access, retention and graduation rates, we grow our university's net tuition revenue. It further supports our overall net cost that is tens of thousands of dollars less than many of our sister institutions.

This important initiative is a critical component of our 10-year strategic plan, Climbing to Greater Heights, and supports our core mission to transform the lives of students and elevate our communities.

Yes, this is bold and aggressive, but it is absolutely the right thing to do for our university, our region, our state and especially our future Hilltoppers.

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