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At SIU, we're giving Chicagoland students easier ways to get a college degree

It's important for colleges and universities to clear whatever hinders students from attaining their full potential.

By Austin A. Lane | Oct 27, 2021, 4:00pm CDT



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This month, Southern Illinois University Carbondale opened more pathways to Chicagoland community college students with limited options, thanks to our new agreements with Harold Washington College (part of City Colleges of Chicago), Harper College and Oakton Community College.

The agreements vary, but they all allow place-bound students to get a bachelor's degree in select programs from a doctoral research university. Harper and Oakton colleges are the latest to join Saluki Step Ahead, an agreement between our university and the Illinois Community College Board to provide place-bound students with a bachelor's degree at a lower cost. If students can't move to Southern Illinois to complete their education, we will bring SIU Carbondale to them.

Opinion

These agreements are another example of the steps universities must take to improve access and remove barriers for all students. This issue is personal to me.

When I left high school over 30 years ago, I had a scholarship to play basketball at a junior college in Texas. The only idea I had was to stay for two years and get exposure, then play in Division I. When those plans didn't work out, I knew I needed to complete my undergraduate education.

But I faced a major obstacle: I couldn't afford a college education in my native state of New Jersey. Fortunately, I was able to earn my bachelor's degree in Oklahoma, which was less expensive. With that degree, along with a master's and a doctorate, I have a career I love, helping students pursue their dreams.

Broader access for students who need it most

Today, with millions of jobs lost to COVID-19 and the need for highly skilled professionals expected to grow, the issue of access to higher education becomes more urgent. All the opportunities that come from a college degree cannot benefit a student who believes college is beyond their reach. Too often, high school graduates and adult learners are deterred from even applying because they think they don't have the right test scores or fear unmanageable debt.

At SIU Carbondale, we're proud of the distinctive education we offer. Students receive hands-on learning and personal attention. Undergraduates can do research often reserved for graduate students. At SIU, we believe it's our responsibility to provide access to those opportunities, whether they can take in-person classes on our beautiful campus or are place-bound.

Many SIU students do not come from privileged backgrounds. About 40% are the first in their families to attend college, and nearly 80% receive financial aid.

They might not be able to afford expensive classes to maximize their scores on standardized tests, and studies have shown GPA is a more accurate predictor of student success. So we removed an obstruction for many qualified students and no longer require SAT and ACT test scores for admission and most scholarships.

And even students without the best grades in high school have the potential to do college-level work. They deserve a chance. That is why we relaunched the Dr. Seymour Bryson Future Scholars program. Students take summer classes and receive academic coaching, advising, mentoring and tutoring. In the past, the program has assisted students from diverse races and communities.

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At SIU, we are also lifting financial barriers between students and their education.

Out-of-state students pay the same tuition rate as Illinois residents. For new students from Illinois who meet the criteria, we have started two exciting initiatives: the Saluki Commitment and the Saluki Transfer Commitment. If a student's financial aid package does not completely cover tuition and mandatory fees, we pledge to close the gap.

It's important for colleges and universities to clear whatever hinders students from attaining their full potential. It is in the best interest of our students, our institutions and our society.

Austin A. Lane is chancellor of Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

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