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Shrinking the Inequality Gap

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Shrinking the Inequality Gap

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Tuesday March 3, 2020

By Eric F. Spina

(This piece originally appeared on my [LinkedIn page](#) on March 3, 2020.)

As I listened to the dreams and aspirations of *Flyer Promise* students over a recent dinner at my house, I imagined what the future could be if the financial barriers vanished for all who desired a college education, no matter their circumstances.

On the University of Dayton's campus, *Flyer Promise* students are among our brightest and most motivated. Their retention rate of 99 percent for three cohorts is near-perfect. Many are first-generation students, and all come from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds. They're on track to graduate and enter a world in which they will lead.

At the American Talent Initiative's (ATI) upcoming 2020 Presidential Summit, I will serve on a panel with presidents from UCLA, Emory University and Claremont McKenna College and discuss this signature scholarship program and other ways the University of Dayton has increased the socioeconomic diversity of our undergraduate student body.

Along with other colleges and universities with high graduation rates, we're part of ATI because we believe strongly that a student's ZIP code, income, or race should not affect their chances of attending and graduating from a high-quality college or university. Together, we're striving to enroll 50,000 high-achieving low- and middle-income (what's known as Pell Grant-eligible) students by 2025.

The University of Dayton has increased Pell Grant enrollment in the first-year class by 43 percent over the last three years, while reaching record retention and graduation rates. It's a significant step on a challenging journey for a private university with a modest endowment. I'm sharing the [University of Dayton's progress report on access and affordability initiatives](#) — even though it's just one snapshot in time — to share what's making a difference on our campus.

Some highlights of our comprehensive strategy:

- We adopted a four-year transparent tuition plan that eliminates fees and holds a student's net tuition constant. We've achieved record-level measures of student success, and student loan borrowing decreased for students of every race and in every socioeconomic background.
- The *Flyer Promise* program offers significant scholarship dollars to talented students from partner high schools. Since the launch of the program, about 300 donors have stepped forward with \$3.3 million in private gifts to support the program. Scholarships for access remain our highest fundraising priority.
- We've significantly reduced the cost of a bachelor's degree through an innovative partnership with Sinclair Community College. Students admitted into the UD Sinclair Academy are University of Dayton and Sinclair Community College students from day one. Once they earn their associate's degrees, they seamlessly embark on their junior year on our campus, where their net tuition is locked in at the rate in effect when they entered the Academy. The Academy offers students over 60 pathways to a University of Dayton degree.
- We're building a robust strategy to recruit military veterans and offer the kind of support that will ensure they earn a college degree. Starting next semester, veterans enrolled as undergraduates under the Post-9/11 GI Bill will pay nothing in out-of-pocket tuition.
- We're launching a pilot "Student Success Champions" program of coaches and mentors who inspire and encourage students to set their sights high and to reach to achieve their dreams.

- We've expanded our partnerships with regional organizations, like "Say Yes Cleveland" and "I Know I Can" in Columbus, that offer scholarships to those who cannot afford it.

The University of Dayton has made notable progress, but we're not satisfied. We must ensure that our retention and graduation rates increase for all students so that enabling access to our university also means ensuring success. We will continue to accelerate our momentum along with other colleges and universities to ensure that a college degree remains in reach for talented students from every ZIP code.