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University of Dayton

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'High-Flier' recognition for supporting low-income students : University of Dayton, Ohio

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A 'High-Flier' designation for supporting low-income students

Cynthia Bukirwa knew what she wanted: to go to college to become a doctor. She just didn't know how.

"I applied to 20 schools," she said. "I just needed one to give me an opportunity... to show me they believe in me. And UD did that for me."

Bukirwa, a first-generation American and first-generation college student, shared her story at a community-wide event celebrating UD's national recognition as a "High-Flier."

Bloomberg Philanthropies and the American Talent Initiative (ATI) named UD alongside 28 colleges and universities — including members of the Ivy League, elite liberal arts schools and the nation's public flagship universities — for its national leadership and steady progress in recruiting, supporting and graduating lower-income students.

UD is the only school in Ohio, and the only Catholic institution in the country, to earn the distinction.

‘Opportunity and impact’

UD has grown enrollment of students eligible for the federal Pell Grant by 50% in recent years through considerable investments in financial aid and dedicated programs that support community college transfers, first-generation students and others from underrepresented backgrounds. About 20% of incoming students are now Pell-eligible.

“UD has demonstrated the will and the skill to find, support, educate and launch low-income students into lives of opportunity and impact,” said Dan Porterfield, president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, which manages ATI alongside Bloomberg Philanthropies. “The university is a national leader in this area. It has some assets that are really distinctive: the Marianist tradition; the Catholic respect for the whole person; and the understanding of the dignity of each and every person. These values are so profound here, so you start the work in a position of moral leadership.”

Porterfield, along with leaders from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Wilpon Family Foundation, visited campus to hear from students and alumni in signature programs, including the [Flyer Promise Scholars](#) and UD Sinclair Academy. The group toured the Hub Powered by PNC, stopped at Sinclair College, and met with representatives from the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community and the [Greater West Dayton Incubator](#) to learn more about UD’s economic and social impact as an anchor institution and partner university.

“It’s exciting to see how that commitment to lower-income students and to the community is two sides of the same coin,” Porterfield said.

‘You earned being here’

Students brought meaning to discussions about access throughout the day. Kessler Scholar Tererra Hellman, who is pursuing her associate degree in psychology at Sinclair before transitioning to UD, shared that she is not only the first in her family to attend college, but was the first to graduate high school. The UD Sinclair Academy [Kessler Scholars](#) program for first-generation students is supported by the Kessler Scholars Collaborative and the American Talent Initiative with funding support from the Judy and Fred Wilpon Family Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies.

“I never thought a four-year school would be possible for me,” she told the group. She said she hopes her education can give her family upward mobility in future generations.

The Kessler program, Hellman said, has already helped her make friends and find the resources she needs, including a bus pass to get to classes.

“Through the summer bridge program, we all basically became a family,” she said.

Fred Wilpon, whose foundation helped UD create the UD Sinclair Academy Kessler Scholars program, told Hellman and the other Kessler scholars gathered at Sinclair not to feel “lucky” they are here.

“You earned being here,” he said. “I never want you to feel, ‘I’m lucky to be here.’ Please have that feeling of worth.”

Like Hellman, Bukirwa spoke about the barriers she faced in pursuing a four-year education. She moved from Uganda, and after just a year and a half in the U.S., had to navigate a high school experience disrupted by the pandemic. That hasn’t stopped her from thriving at UD and beyond.

Since arriving on campus as a Flyer Promise Scholar, she has become co-vice president of the Multicultural Association of Premedical Students, participated in a medical mission trip to Honduras, and completed a clinical research internship experience at UConn Health. Inspired by her mother who suffered chemical burns in Uganda, she plans to go on to medical school.

“I loved education... and I pursued that,” she said. “I’m going to do everything it takes because I know it’s worth it.”