The University of Kentucky, like most public, land-grant institutions, has a long commitment to student success. More students graduating translates into a stronger economy, more civic engagement, and a solid tax base, among a host of other public benefits.

In an effort to meet our land-grant mission, over the last year, we have delved deeply into our own institutional data to understand better why our students succeed and why they don’t. Four primary domains – what we call pillars of success – have emerged:

- Academic preparation and ability;
- Student health and wellness [both physical and emotional];
- Student belonging and community building; and
- Financial stability.

Not surprisingly, we found that all four pillars heavily influenced one another. They are, in fact, interrelated. As a result, over the past year, we restructured all of our units that touch and impact student success to better facilitate the path taken from the day they enter the university through graduation.

What we also found, though, was that a student’s financial stability often plays a substantial, if not singularly important, role in persistence and success.

So, as the University for Kentucky, we have evaluated how we structure our scholarships and have decided to chart a dramatically different path than what is predominant in much of higher education today. We have decided to blaze a different path, one geared toward being much more aggressive in facilitating the success of students and families of limited financial means.

It is right for our students; and it is right for the Commonwealth. And it may be what is right for America, particularly land-grant institutions whose work and missions are so inextricably tied to the states they serve.

Specifically, through an extensive review of internal data, we discovered that once a student exceeded $5,000 or more in unmet financial need retention dropped precipitously. (We define unmet need as the amount remaining after the expected family contribution and all other aid [institutional, state and federal aid] was applied.)

This rate of attrition held even when we controlled for academic preparation and achievement. For example, students with a college grade point average of 3.0 or higher who did not return had a much higher level of unmet financial need than students with similar academic performance who did come back for their second year at UK.
In fact, the 3.0 or higher students, who were retained – on average – had no unmet need and actually had excess funding. The 3.0 or higher students who were not retained had an average of unmet need that exceeded more than $6,000.

That’s unacceptable to us.

As the state’s land-grant institution we have an ethical obligation to provide affordable and accessible opportunities for higher education. In response, we recently announced a new institutional aid program called UK LEADS (Leveraging Economic Affordability for Developing Success).

The purpose of UK LEADS is to reimagine the role institutional aid plays in our student success goals. Aid is no longer simply or predominantly a means to enter the institution, it is now an important factor in aiding persistence and graduation.

Through this program, we plan to shift a significant portion of our institutional aid away from merit and toward financial need. Some details of our plan:

- Currently, about 90 percent of our institutional aid is targeted toward merit, but by 2021 we hope that 65 percent of our aid will be allocated based on financial need.
- For this year’s entering, first-year class more than $22 million of our dedicated $25 million was based on academic merit.
- Under the UK LEADS initiative, more than $17 million would have been distributed based upon financial need, with $8 million awarded based upon academic merit or other factors.

Although we are located in a state with significant economic challenges, we know these kinds of financial hardships for academically capable students play out across most, if not all, states served by our land-grant universities. Thus, we believe it is incumbent upon all of us with a specific historic mission of service to states to prioritize a path toward greater access and success for academically capable students, who need financial assistance.

Our land-grant mission necessitates that we provide service to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. We are the University for Kentucky. We provide that service through many mechanisms, from agricultural extension, to art, to medicine. UK LEADS, therefore, is in keeping with this long tradition of service.

We strongly believe that by better meeting the financial needs of many of our students we will assure that we continue to produce the educated citizenry that is needed to move Kentucky forward.

UK LEADS represents a bold investment in our students and in our state’s future.

In so doing, it also may be a model for how land-grant institutions can, in an important sense, renew and enhance their historic legacy of service for a new generation of families – and those who will
follow – in a 21st century where the skills that higher education provides are so critical to success.

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