



CREATING A COMMUNITY OF BELONGING BY EMBRACING ACCESS FOR ALL

Founded on a principle that education should be available to every citizen, Kent State is committed to breaking down barriers that inhibit access and hinder degree completion.

BY KAT BRAZ

Kent State boasts a legacy of inclusivity that traces back to its first full academic year on the Kent Campus in fall 1913. With a class of 138 women and six men, Kent State Normal School began as a school for working adults, educating women at a time when many universities enrolled very few—if they were admitted at all.

Years later, baby boomers—primarily first-generation children of immigrants to Northeast Ohio and African American migrants to Cleveland, Akron and Youngstown—enrolled in large numbers on the Kent Campus and at the university’s Regional Campuses. This diverse enrollment trend led to the founding of Black United Students and the first celebration of Black History Month—established at Kent State in February 1970 by students and faculty in Pan-African Studies, preceding the national holiday designation in 1976.

As Kent State University President Todd Diacon puts it, “Access, diversity and degree completion are in our institutional DNA.” And as the university looks to the future, it remains

committed to being a place of belonging where all students can cultivate their talents and create a brighter tomorrow.

“Universities are driven by foundational cultures and histories—and Kent State is no exception,” Diacon says. “Broad accessibility and a diverse student body have been ever-present at Kent State.”

Today, embracing a new wave of access and diversity at Kent State means enrolling more underrepresented students as well as first-generation students, nontraditional students and students with high financial need. Historically, these populations have lower rates of attending and graduating from college. Often there are intersections across these populations. Understanding the barriers to access and dismantling them are the first steps toward further increasing graduation rates.

Read on to learn how Kent State continues to expand on its commitment to the founding principle that education should be available to every citizen.

Affordability Is Paramount to Expanding Access to Education

The university hit a record graduation rate this year, with 67.5% of first-time, full-time freshmen who enrolled in fall 2015 earning their bachelor’s degrees within six years. Ten years ago, the graduation rate for the Kent Campus was 49%.

“Our data shows that students who fail to earn a degree at Kent State, particularly at the Kent Campus, drop out because they cannot afford college,” Diacon says. “We need to crack this nut of affordability for roughly 20% of our Kent Campus students with the highest levels of financial need and the lowest rates of graduation.”

The threat of choking off access to a college degree due to the rising costs of higher education led Kent State to introduce the Flashes Go Further Scholarship Program earlier this summer. The ambitious effort reallocates 3.3% of the annual university budget—about \$20 million each year—to help eligible students cover the costs of tuition, general fees and books. It was established to help those students stay in school and get to graduation with as little student loan debt as possible.

“We recognize the power of education to reshape a person’s trajectory, not just for themselves, but often also for their family,” says Sean Broghammer, PhD, interim vice president for enrollment management. “Social mobility can be positively impacted by a degree from Kent State, but one of the primary barriers for students to gain access to the university is cost.”

Students qualify if they are taking at least 12 credit hours on the Kent Campus and their expected family contribution (EFC on the FAFSA) is \$10,000 or less. This applied to about 20% of the first-year entering class this fall 2021. For these students, Flashes Go Further will cover the difference between the cost of tuition and the amount of grants and scholarships a student receives. Students do not have to apply to the program, they only need to file the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). Financial need is determined by the results of the FAFSA and Kent State automatically makes the award.

“Flashes Go Further provides an avenue for students who otherwise might not think completing a college degree is a possibility for them because of the cost,” Broghammer says.

Learn more about the Flashes Go Further Scholarship Program at www.kent.edu/financialaid/flashes-go-further-scholarship-program.

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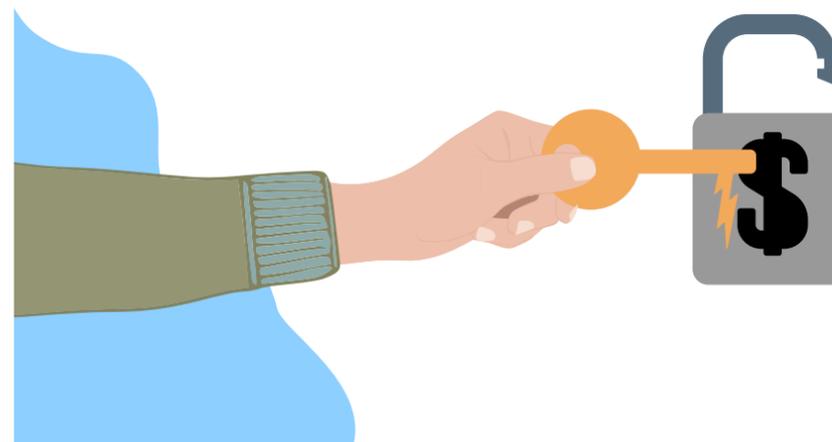
How is Expected Family Contribution (EFC) Calculated?

A student’s EFC is an index number that college financial aid staff use to determine how much financial aid a student receives. The EFC is calculated using information reported on the student’s FAFSA such as the family’s taxed income and untaxed income, assets and benefits (e.g., unemployment or Social Security). Also considered are family size and the number of family members attending college during the year.

—U.S. Department of Education

Flashes Go Further Scholarship By the Numbers

- 2,745** Number of students who received an award for fall 2021 as of 9/29/21
- \$2,588** Average scholarship award for fall 2021
- 8** Number of semesters new freshman may receive the award
- 6** Number of semesters incoming transfer students may receive the award





A Sense of Belonging Begins With Equitable Access

Cost may be the single biggest barrier to student access, but economic challenges extend beyond dollars and cents. Other factors, such as access to social capital and resources, must be considered as well.

“Social capital includes the social network of students,” says Amoaba Gooden, PhD, vice president for the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). “Do they have mentors who might guide them down a particular path? Do they have school counselors who talk to them about scholarship applications? Do they have individuals in their lives who will support them in their decision making, in filling out their applications?”

“When it comes to access, we have to think beyond traditional students and include nontraditional students who might have some of those same challenges. They may also be caregivers of additional family members. Do they have the resources within their community or their network that they can tap into to achieve their dream of attending an institution of higher learning?”

From a DEI perspective, much of the work to become a student-ready college—one prepared to welcome and support students from all backgrounds and levels of academic experience—hinges on ensuring that policies, procedures, processes and programs are equitable. Faculty and staff working across Kent State’s campuses must be equipped with the skills to assess and promote diversity, equity and inclusion.

“People often equate diversity with race or ethnicity and conflate the two,” Gooden says. “In its first iteration, diversity was primarily based on access for African Americans to traditionally white institutions. Diversity is now more nuanced and complex and has evolved over time.

“In DEI, we’re focusing on populations that have been historically marginalized and excluded because of factors such

From a DEI perspective, much of the work to become a student-ready college—one prepared to welcome and support all types of students entering the institution—hinges on ensuring that policies, procedures, processes and programs are equitable.

as race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, veteran status and socioeconomic status. We also focus on how those identities combine and create different forms of discrimination. And we work with areas across our campuses to ensure that that our programs also foster a sense of belonging and inclusion and there’s equitable access to all.”

To foster that sense of belonging, Kent State must continue to establish and maintain an inclusive environment in order to reach its goals for access, completion and outcomes. If prospective students do not feel represented on campus, they may not enroll. Or if they do come—and don’t receive the support they need—they may not graduate and go on to a successful career.

The Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion advocates for individuals by connecting them with resources to resolve issues. It also offers professional development opportunities and educational training for students, faculty and staff.

Earlier this year, the university embarked on a university-wide Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategic plan to decentralize diversity efforts and improve Kent State for all

members of the community. The four-year effort will build and execute a strategy that will embed diversity, equity and inclusion practices throughout the eight-campus system.

While many programs and units exist to support DEI efforts, a university-wide DEI strategic plan will create more systemic and intentional ways of addressing equity as well as dismantling policies, procedures and processes that marginalize members of the community.

“The goals of the division are strategic institutional goals,” Gooden says. “As we work to expand access across the university, one of our goals is for the population of Kent State to better reflect the population of the state. The division will work in collaboration with the Kent State community to realize that goal.”

Learn more about the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at www.kent.edu/diversity.

Coming Together for Conversations About Social Justice Issues

The Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) began hosting a series of town hall events titled “Shaping a Better Future: Dialogues and Strategizing for Change” in 2020. Forums included the Black American Experience, the Asian American Experience and the Trans Experience, among others.

“The town halls bring the university together to provide an environment where we can grapple with social justice issues,” Amoaba Gooden says. “Students, faculty and staff are willing to be vulnerable in this space and share their personal experiences. These are powerful conversations that build knowledge and understanding.”

This fall, in collaboration with the College of Arts and Sciences, DEI announced a continuation of last year’s series. Titled “Empowering Kent State: Valuing the Strength of Diversity,” this series expands the conversation, covering topics such as (dis)ability, critical race theory and intersectionality, and international and immigrant experiences.



Addressing Complex Questions Requires Innovative Approaches

Offering 10 multidisciplinary minors and three majors, the newly formed School of Multidisciplinary Social Sciences and Humanities provides an academic home for students asking complex questions in pursuit of courageous answers.

“The school has everything from Jewish studies to LGBTQ studies to women’s studies to Latin American studies,” says Julie Mazzei, PhD, associate professor of political science and interim director of the school. “This is a place where students seek out degree programs where they can pursue their intellectual curiosity in places that feel safe and reflective and joyful for them for whatever reason, whether they identify with these groups or not. It’s a mode of access, but it’s a mode of advocacy, too.”

Established this fall within the College of Arts and Sciences, the school also houses the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, which was the first in the state when it began in 2015.

“The center may not have been designed with belonging or community in mind,” Mazzei says. “It was designed to address a really important research question and dedicate intellectual energy to it. Organically, it has become one of those spaces where students recognize they are at home because it’s a safe and welcoming place where people show value and commitment to issues that are real to them.”

Learn more about the School of Multidisciplinary Social Sciences and Humanities at www.kent.edu/multidisciplinary-studies.



“I chose to be an LGBT Studies minor because my major didn't address the unique needs of LGBTQ people in health. After graduating, I want to go into LGBTQ cultural competency in healthcare and continue pursuing the study of gender and sexuality in graduate school.”

Kent State student

Complex Questions Courses within the School of Multidisciplinary Social Sciences and Humanities cover a range of complex questions within their curricula. Here are some examples:

- Black Lives Matter became a global call for action. But the organizing was very local. How and why do local anti-racist movements gain traction around the globe?
- The celebration of lived experiences, both those of the past and those wished for the future, is often visible in the art, literature and communal practices of immigrants. What can we learn about the migration experience from these cultural expressions?
- Pride parades have evolved from declarations for freedom that entailed great personal risk to incredibly popular events with very little risk to participants. How does this evolution happen? Who leads the shift in social “norms”?
- Why and how does anti-Semitism persist? Are hate groups increasing in number? Who is funding them? What can communities and governments do to combat anti-Semitism?

Subsisting on Instant Ramen Shouldn't Be a Badge of Honor

There’s an outdated narrative that persists among college campuses and their alumni about the disheartening situations previous generations toughed out as students. Ericka Shoaff, BA '11, inaugural director of the CARES Center, has heard it all before: “I lived paycheck to paycheck.” “I didn’t have an apartment and crashed on people’s couches.” “I survived only on ramen when I was in college; it’s no big deal.” Except, it is.

“Some of these narratives have been normalized,” Shoaff says. “But we can see that these are issues of basic needs insecurity and of lack of access to resources. If a student doesn’t know where their next meal is coming from or if they don’t have a stable place to sleep, it’s incredibly challenging to maintain their academic pursuits much less thrive.”

The CARES Center, which stands for Crisis, Advocacy, Resources, Education, Support, opened this fall in the Kent Student Center. The idea emerged from students who participated in the 2018 kaizen event hosted by the Great Place Initiative. (“Kaizen” is a Japanese word that essentially means “change for good.” It relates to a business philosophy of continuous improvement.) In its first semester, the center received more than 100 referrals for its case management services.

“The fact that the idea of the CARES Center came from student voices is really inspiring,” Shoaff says. “A few years ago, it was an idea on paper. Now it’s an actual physical space with services and a mission. It’s a testament to Kent State’s willingness to listen to student voices and implement real change. That’s very meaningful.”

The CARES Center, under the Division of Student Affairs, acts as a centralized resource hub where students can connect with service providers, both on campus and off, for assistance in four main categories: food security, stable housing, financial sustainability and mental well-being.

Kent State CARES

The four priority areas of the CARES Center are:

- **Food security** The Flashes’ Food Pantry at the center provides access to nutritious food. Case workers can also help eligible students sign up for SNAP benefits.
- **Housing stability** When emergency homeless situations arise, the center facilitates the intake and finds temporary housing while connecting the student to community agencies that help secure long-term housing. Case managers can help students look for available housing options and find resources for utilities.
- **Financial sustainability** The center offers emergency aid for basic needs and can connect students with other emergency grants and funding available on and off campus for a variety of needs. Case managers can help students develop financial skills such as creating a budget.
- **Mental well-being** Although the CARES Center does not offer clinical therapy directly, its case managers are licensed social workers who can guide students to the resources and services available on campus and in the community.



Nationwide, 29% of students enrolled at four-year institutions reported experiencing food insecurity in 2020.

The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice at Temple University 2020 #RealCollege Survey

“Students come to us from all walks of life with a variety of backgrounds and experiences,” Shoaff says. “We value meeting students where they are and rallying around them with support. We want to connect students with the resources they need to help them succeed both personally and academically.”

“It’s my hope that the presence of the CARES Center contributes to the destigmatization of accessing resources, so that conversations about basic needs are had often and without hesitation.”

Learn more about the CARES Center and find out how you can partner with it to support students at www.kent.edu/CARESCenter or on social media @KentStateCares.

No One Should Face Discrimination Based on Sex or Gender

The Office of Gender Equity and Title IX, recently reorganized under the Division of Student Affairs, is one of many groups in the university dedicated to fostering a sense of belonging, inclusivity, well-being and safety. “Kent State has a legacy of collaborative partnerships working together to keep our campuses welcoming, inviting and safe,” says Tiffany Murray, JD, director of the Office of Gender Equity and Title IX, and Kent State’s designated Title IX coordinator.

Murray points to Kent State’s national recognition as a “Great College to Work For” (Chronicles of Higher Education, 2020) and one of the “30 Most Promising Places to Work in Student Affairs” (American College Personnel Association, 2021) as evidence of the work being done to create an inclusive campus. The university also was ranked the safest campus in Ohio in six of the last 10 years (FBI Uniform Crime Statistics).

The Office of Gender Equity and Title IX is tasked with maintaining and enforcing university policies and compliance efforts regarding gender equity and Title IX, including reports involving sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking. Title IX’s sexual harassment prohibitions apply to all students, faculty, staff and visitors. Previously, these functions were implemented by the Division of Human Resources.

Murray and her staff—now located in the Kent Student Center in Room 250—also implement ongoing prevention initiatives across Kent State’s eight-campus system. “We’re not just the office that investigates matters,” Murray says. “We proactively work to prevent these violations from occurring in the first place. We do this by educating staff and students on the university community standards and our commitment to inclusion and refraining from engaging in unwelcomed and unwanted contact.”

Learn more about the Office of Gender Equity and Title IX at www.kent.edu/studentaffairs/genderequity-titleix.

Why the Office of Gender Equity and Title IX Was Reorganized:

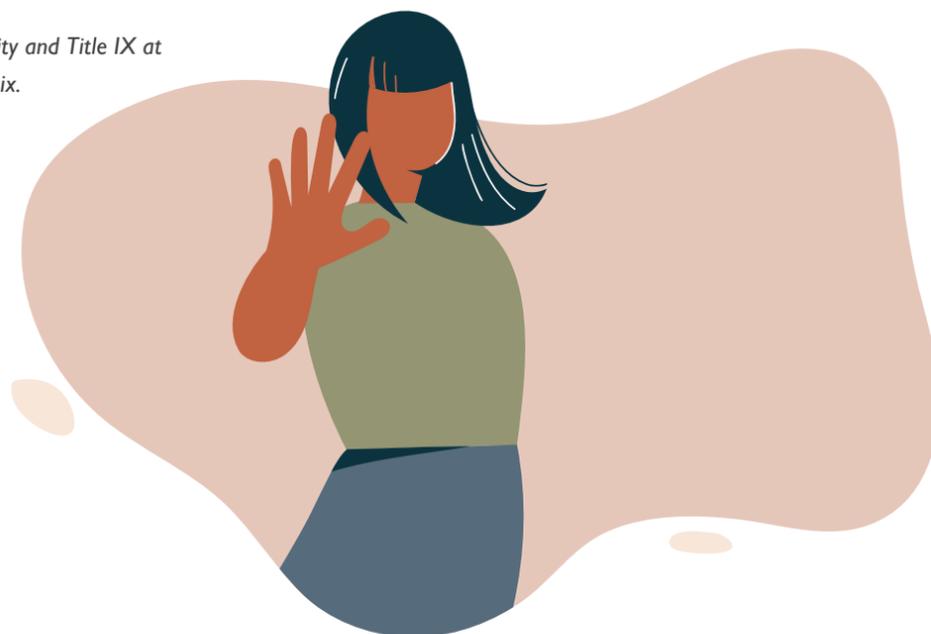
- To strengthen university partnerships and bring together student-facing resources.
- To streamline operations and improve resolution response strategies related to discrimination and harassment.

Title IX Defined

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal law enforced by the U.S. Department of Education that requires all federally funded institutions (such as Kent State) to operate free of discrimination based on sex, including sexual orientation and gender identity.

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—
Tiffany Murray, JD



It’s Not About Meeting a Quota; It’s About Genuine Representation of Experiences and Identities

Lamar R. Hylton, PhD, senior vice president for student affairs, knows firsthand about the transformative power of education. He was born the summer before his mother started her senior year in high school. His father was already in the workforce. Hylton, the first Black person in the university’s history to hold the title of vice president for student affairs, is a first-generation college student.

“I watched my parents climb their way up,” Hylton says. “It’s hard to do that on a high school education. When I had the ability to go to college, I needed scholarships and financial assistance. I needed help navigating this new environment. My parents weren’t positioned to help me financially.

“My immediate family’s experience is very different than what my lived experience was growing up, in a very good way. I firmly believe that the changing catalyst for me was obtaining a college degree and, eventually, my PhD. It’s exactly the reason why I feel so strongly about the way we position a collegiate education because it can be transformational, particularly for those students like me who did not come from means or experiences that would indicate opportunities to be successful in a university setting.”

Putting more emphasis on the resources available to underrepresented or marginalized students helps break down the stigmas surrounding barriers to access. Hylton, who was promoted to senior vice president for student affairs at the start of the school year, embraces a student-focused approach to leadership that equips students with the resources and support they need to succeed academically.

It’s an approach that’s gained him local and national recognition. In recent months, Hylton has been named the recipient of the NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) Region IV-East Scott Goodnight Award for Outstanding Senior Student Affairs Officer for 2021, named to Crain’s Cleveland Business Forty Under 40, selected as a recipient of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Diamond Honoree award and is a member of the 2022 class of the NASPA Pillars of the Profession award.

“Our student experience is the way that we begin to open the doors and remove the barriers to accessing an education.”

—
Lamar Hylton, PhD

“I firmly believe in centering the student experience and acting in the best interest of the students we are called to serve,” Hylton says. “Our student experience is the way that we begin to open the doors and remove the barriers to accessing an education. I’m proud that our campus community is not only thinking more broadly about the ways in which we remain as accessible as possible to everyone and anyone who would want an education from Kent State but also how we are taking action to implement real change.”

Learn more about the Division of Student Affairs at www.kent.edu/studentaffairs.



Call to Action

Although the university has made significant progress in its goals to expand access and increase rates of completion, there is more work to be done. Lamar Hylton describes his appointment as the first Black vice president of student affairs as a double-edged sword. He’s honored to be named in the annals of the university’s history by way of his historic vice presidency, but he also recognizes his status as “the first” as a call to action that there is more work to be done at the institution.

“If we are committed to a sense of belonging as an institution, a part of that belonging is seeing others who look like you,” Hylton says. “It’s no secret that people of color, more specifically Black or African American identifying students, have given voice to being the ‘only’ in their class. Being an ‘only’ can negatively impact your academic experience. Whether it’s the only Black person, the only woman, the only LGBTQ+, the only differently-abled, it’s hard.

“It’s wildly important for us to make sure that our campus represents a diverse spectrum. Not just racially or ethnically, but across all categories. I don’t want the university to meet a quota. I want us to have some genuine representation of people and experiences and identities that make Kent State University the best place it can possibly be. And that starts with ensuring equitable access for all.” ⚡