

Pell Grants vital to student success

As a first-generation college student, I know on a deeply personal level the importance of the Fort Hays State University drive to offer the best value in higher education – anywhere! We believe in the transformative power of a college education and how it impacts generations of families and communities.

I have a vivid memory of listening to a colleague talk about the American dream. She described with eloquence the grit and determination in which our nation – and our university – were founded.

In doing so, she used a common phrase: all one needs to do is to “pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps.” I agree. Resilience is definitely to what I attribute my success. Certainly, socioeconomic advancement is something that everyone should be able to experience, right? After all, we live in the United State of America – the land of opportunity. We hear story after story how hard work pays off.

Then, my colleague reminded us that not everyone is born with bootstraps. That’s when I realized that although my college journey did indeed include hard work and sacrifice, I was also blessed with a loving family, caring faculty, and so many more advantages. I realized I was indeed a first-generation student, coming from a modest income home, who had been born with bootstraps.

Through these columns and other presentations, I have shared stories of students who have overcome remarkable odds to get to college and graduate. Students from shattered families and even some without a family. Students who were illegally brought to this country as babies and grew up not knowing they were not citizens – knowledge that painted a very bleak future. Adult students who struggled with addictions, poverty, loss, and even prison sentences. Students without bootstraps.

Each extraordinary story I have shared has ended with a Fort Hays State graduate. I am so proud to be part of a university that has always been focused on making student success equitable and inclusive by expanding opportunities for students who would otherwise have few, if any, options for realizing the American Dream.

Our ability to expand access and success requires many partners. The university itself has embraced a historic commitment to underserved student populations with an exemplary learning and teaching-centered culture. Our philanthropists and community partners have demonstrated consistent generosity through scholarship programs. State and federal government funding have also helped with student access and affordability. One such program is the Pell Grant – need-based grants to low-income undergraduates designed to make college attendance an affordable reality.

Congress is currently considering doubling the maximum Pell Grant award to \$13,000. Think about the value that would have at Fort Hays State University!

We believe that cost should not be a barrier to the success of our students. Our unmatched value would get even better, help more students, create more bootstraps, should Double Pell come to fruition. Look what Pell has done for Rylie and Slater.

Slater Heglin, from Ulysses, is a senior at Fort Hays State University and a highly respected student leader. He is majoring in business education with a concentration in talent development. Slater is also receiving certificates in leadership studies, human resource management, business management, banking, and marketing. He is involved in the FHSU Society for Human Resource Management, FHSU Foundation & Alumni Association Tigers Forever, Circle K, Collegiate 4-H, and Encounter.

Slater shared that “coming from a single-parent home, I knew from a young age that I would be paying for college on my own.”

He is grateful for the Pell Grant and scholarships that have helped him achieve his goal of graduating debt-free. He has worked diligently to achieve a high GPA, along with his community involvement both on campus and in the community. He works three jobs and applies for many scholarships each year, but Slater acknowledged that Pell Grant has contributed greatly toward his goal of graduating from college debt-free.

“My experience as a college student at Fort Hays State University has been a catalyst in pursuing my life-long passion for servant-leadership,” he said. “Since I have received tremendous support through scholarship and Pell opportunities, I have been able to devote my time and resources to serving in over four organizations and committees on campus. Without the financial support I have received through Pell, I may not have had the opportunity to serve in the capacity that I have thus far. Obtaining my undergraduate and potential graduate degree from FHSU would show that, no matter what background an individual comes from, with hard work, grit and determination, dreams do come true. Fort Hays State University is truly investing in the leaders of today and tomorrow.”

Rylie Zeller from Little River agrees.

“Higher education would not have been possible for me without the opportunity of being awarded the Pell grant. With the financial burden of college reduced, I have been able to prioritize my studies and focus my time on doing well in classes,” she said. “I am excited to pursue a degree in agriculture education, and the financial responsibilities have been one less thing to worry about because of the Pell.”

Rylie is a sophomore majoring in agriculture education, and like Slater, she will be receiving a certificate in leadership studies.

I do love how our students take such a strong interest in leadership. Rylie works on campus in the Financial Aid office. Even though she benefits from both Pell and other aid, Rylie also works two jobs off campus. By the way, a recent study by the Docking Institute of Public Affairs indicates that 93% of our students work, and 10% work both on-campus and off-campus jobs.

Doubling the Pell Grant would increase the pool of students – students like Rylie and Slater – eligible for the aid, providing more opportunities to attend college. It also would, on average, cut student debt by more than half, according to research by the Gender Equity Policy Institute.

Tiger Nation is a diverse and welcoming community, dedicated to sharing ideas and serving the greater good. On campus, online, and all over the world, we invest in close and lifelong relationships that nurture the humanity in all of us and educate the next generation of globally engaged citizen leaders.

As we continue our important work, on behalf of a young Tisa, Rylie, Slater, and so many other Tigers, I thank our philanthropists and legislators for their investment in higher education, I also join my colleagues in urging our Kansas congressional delegation to push for courageous and meaningful improvements to the Pell Grant program.