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First-of-its-kind football partnership helps to move us forward after affirmative action | Opinion

Dr. Dale G. Caldwell, president of Centenary University in Hackettstown, touts a partnership with Sussex County Community College. The program provides SCCC student athletes with on-campus residences at Centenary as well as access to support services and a tight-knit community.

Nick Scalera | For NJ Advance Media

By Dale Caldwell

Earlier this summer, the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action in college admissions. Almost immediately, people began pointing to other programs like legacy admissions, targeted scholarships, and athletics that could provide an unfair advantage in the admissions process. While some of this is justified, the reality remains that racial disparities in higher education exist — and it's in everybody's best interest to knock down those barriers.

Here's why: According to a [study](#) by the American Action Forum, a 1% increase in the number of adults with bachelor's degrees translates into a 0.08% increase in real gross domestic product. To put it more simply: If every state raised the number of bachelor's degrees earned by just 1 percent, the United States would see a \$103.5 billion increase in GDP.

Yet, students of color still face significant hurdles when it comes to college equity. The Lumina Foundation recently [reported](#) that Black students cite cost, a lack of extracurricular support, and racial discrimination as barriers to degree attainment. In fact, only 34% of Black Americans have an associate degree or higher — compared to 46% of the general population.

At colleges and universities, our marching orders are clear: We must find new, innovative ways to overcome the obstacles that prevent talented students from earning a college degree. One such program exists through a unique partnership between Sussex County Community College (SCCC) and Centenary University in Hackettstown, where I assumed the presidency on July 1. It's called the [SkyClones Partnership](#), a name merging the mascots of both institutions.

MEDIA Coverage



Now entering its third year, this partnership — the first of its kind in the state — provides residence life space on Centenary’s campus for SCCC students, primarily football players. These student-athletes have access to support services available to Centenary and SCCC students, plus the benefit of living within a tight-knit campus community.

Nearly three years later, the results are remarkable. In a fall 2022 survey of SkyClones participants, 30% said they would not have attended college without this needed support and opportunity.

Some of these players are first-generation college students from households without the family and high school support to understand the college admissions and financial aid process. A few are already fathers, while several were homeless and living in cars. Today, all players have a safe place to live and access to healthy meals. Even more impressive, almost every SCCC football player in the first cohort has gone on to further their education at a four-year college.

Enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion was also important to both institutions, which are located in Sussex and Warren counties, two of the least diverse parts of New Jersey. The football roster is comprised of student -athletes from all over New Jersey and Pennsylvania — as well as several from Georgia, Tennessee, and Florida — who are predominantly Black. Students mingle on Centenary’s campus in the residence halls and at events, fostering a new intercultural competence among students from both institutions.

The SkyClones Partnership leveraged football as the catalyst to open doors for students who wouldn’t have otherwise considered college. It was successful because it met students where they were, embracing their reality while helping them to envision a different future.

After affirmative action, it is both a moral and economic imperative for colleges and universities to find innovative ways — whether it’s through sports, activities, or other means — to take folks from economic challenge to intellectual brilliance.

Dr. Dale G. Caldwell is the president of Centenary University in Hackettstown, NJ. He graduated from Princeton University, earned an MBA from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and a doctorate from Seton Hall University.

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