

Dr. Hightower Chairs Meeting: SIU Board Makes Historic Hires Related To Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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CARBONDALE – In another move highlighting its strong commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, the Southern Illinois University System Board of Trustees approved three key hires who will lead the university in efforts to fight racism in all its forms. The board also signaled its commitment to student affordability by approving no increase for tuition and fees for undergraduate and graduate students for another year.

The board approved Dr. Sheila Caldwell to serve as the inaugural vice president for antiracism, diversity, equity and inclusion and chief diversity officer (CDO) for the multi-campus university system. Caldwell, a Chicago native and current chief

intercultural engagement officer at Wheaton College, was chosen after an extensive national search was narrowed to five finalists who were interviewed by a search committee and constituency groups made up of faculty, staff and students from across the university's campuses. She will join the president's staff in mid-July.



Also approved was Dr. Jessica Harris, who will serve as SIUE's first vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion. Harris was selected after a national search, which began in mid-October 2020, producing 46 applicants. A former assistant provost for academic equity and inclusive excellence, Harris became a faculty member at SIUE in 2011, working as an associate professor of historical studies in the College of Arts and Sciences and director of the interdisciplinary Black studies program.

The board lastly approved the appointment of Dr. Venessa Brown who will become the first associate athletics director for diversity, equity and inclusion and chief diversity officer for SIUE Intercollegiate Athletics. Brown will be tasked with putting SIUE Athletics at the forefront on campus and across the country with regard to diversity, equity and inclusion. She was most recently the associate chancellor for the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion, chief diversity officer and ethics officer at SIUE.

“Today, this board made pivotal decisions that will have positive outcomes for years to come. The diversity hires we supported prove the SIU campuses are national leaders in promoting diversity, equity and inclusion. Our decision to maintain undergraduate and graduate tuition levels are examples that we are listening to families and to our partners in the General Assembly and throughout state government who are working with us to ensure the issue of affordability remains at the forefront,” said SIU Board Vice Chairman Dr. Ed Hightower, who chaired today’s meeting.

“I believe these hires, and the ones that will follow, send a clear message that we are working together to successfully carry out the board’s charge to foster campus climates that reject racism and focus on expanding diversity, equity and inclusion. Besides being the right thing to do, these actions also strengthen the ties between our campuses as we promote our shared values,” said SIU System President Dan Mahony.

In other important matters, the SIU board reiterated its commitment to student affordability by approving campus decisions to hold undergraduate and graduate tuition and mandatory fees flat for another year. As the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified economic challenges for many, board members fully embraced the need to respond by showing students and their families there is understanding on behalf of leadership throughout the system.