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Demolition of WKU's Barnes-Campbell Hall begins; campus hopes to draw students with new 'First-Year Village'

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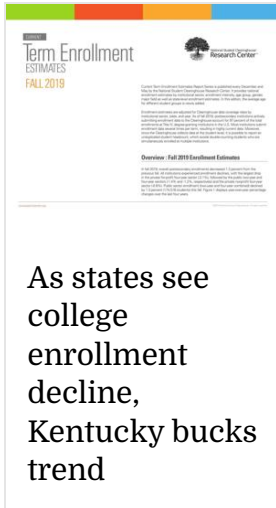
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Construction crews take the "first bite" in the demolition of Barnes Campbell Hall in 2021, in order to make room for the continued construction of the First-Year Village. (Photo by Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

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 +14 SLIDE SHOW: 'First bite' taken in demolition of WKU's Barnes-Campbell Hall

Demolition of Western Kentucky University's Barnes-Campbell Hall began on Wednesday, as the towering arm of a crane reached up to take the first bite out of the dorm that housed about 380 students and dates to 1966.

The 90-day demolition project will clear the way for a new greenspace that campus administrators hope will mirror WKU's South Lawn and become the centerpiece of the in-progress first-year village at the south end of campus. According to Mike Reagle, the executive director of WKU's Housing and Dining division, it's the last key step before the opening of two new residence halls in August.

“What we're trying to do is kind of replicate some of what we are able to do on the South Lawn for the residential students in that area,” Reagle told the Daily News, adding the idea is to create a place for students to “throw a football” or “spread out a blanket and study.”

WKU's first-year village will encompass all the current residence halls at the south end of campus and two new halls – Normal Hall and Regents Hall. Both dormitories are crucial elements of WKU's 10-year strategic plan, which aims to boost the university's first-to-second-year retention rate with a captivating first-year experience that entices freshmen to stay on the Hill.

The vehicle for that is a living-learning community model. Students with similar majors or interests live together on a residence hall floor with regular activities designed to be relevant to their studies or build community. Under WKU's strategic plan, each WKU freshman will get to join a living-learning community.

Both residence halls will feature “pod-style” housing, meaning that about 25 students will share spaces such as a common area, two community bathrooms, one private bathroom and a kitchen. Other key features include faculty-in-residence,

study rooms, classrooms, a dining location and even music practice and recording studios.

Once Barnes-Campbell is out of the way, workers will have a three-month window to begin work on the greenspace. Along with plenty of greenery, Reagle said administrators are also considering the possibility of adding infrastructure for an outdoor concert venue.

The first-year village project aims to get at “How do we do a better job of educating first-year students and attracting first-year students and giving them the true Western experience?” Reagle said. It’s a key question that WKU isn’t alone in confronting.

Even before the coronavirus crisis, colleges and universities across the country had a big problem on their hands -- declining enrollment. In late 2019, data from the National Student

Clearinghouse Research Center showed a decline in fall enrollments for the eighth consecutive year.

Kentucky bucked that trend, with fall 2019 enrollment up by 1.5 percent, or 243,299 students compared to the 239,774 students the previous fall, according to the report. However, the jump was driven by growth at private colleges and by a sharp uptick in high school students taking dual-credit courses at public institutions through Kentucky's Dual Credit Scholarship.

The big picture is the dwindling pipeline of college-going high school graduates in Kentucky. Though Kentucky's high school graduation rate remains sky-high, at more than 90%, there are simply fewer college-going graduates to recruit from.

It's a national trend, with colleges engaged in an amenities arms race to draw students to their campuses. According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, which recently published the latest projections for high school graduates out to 2037. According to the report, at the national level, high school

graduates are projected to peak in number by the mid-2020s, before a period of modest decline through the end of the projections. What's more, increased diversification of graduating classes will be an enduring trend, the Western Interstate Commission projects.

Because of that, WKU is stepping up efforts to recruit outside the state and to make the campus more welcoming for minority students. Most recently, WKU rolled out its "Hilltopper Guarantee". Starting next fall, attendance at Western Kentucky University will be tuition-free to any college freshman from Kentucky receiving Pell Grant assistance and with at least a 3.0 unweighted high school grade-point average.

For Reagle, the first-year village project is more than just a greenspace with two new residence halls and lots of glossy features: "It's about connecting students from across those buildings and connecting them into academic programs," he said.

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