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## Regents eye state funding hike, new programs

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Mar 2, 2024



Timothy Caboni

Clinton Lewis/Submitted

Western Kentucky University's Board of Regents met for their quarterly meeting on Friday with legislative updates on several state bills.

Executive Director of Government and External Relations Jennifer Smith discussed House Bill 6, House Bill 9, Senate Bill 6 and House Bill 630, all of which will impact higher education if passed.

“President (Tim Caboni) has probably been to Frankfort more this year than every other year I’ve made him come up there with me,” Smith said. “We’ve had some great meetings with the Senate to discuss our needs with the budget and our capital. I feel confident in what we’ll see out of the Senate.”

HB6, the biennial budget that has already passed in the House, will provide a 3% base performance increase to WKU in its first year and no increase in the second year if no changes are made in the Senate.

Smith said funding for Gatton Academy and the Kentucky Mesonet will also remain unchanged but roughly \$1.5 million will be added to WKU’s Kentucky Employees Retirement System Pension Subsidy each year.

The House also included roughly \$2.1 million each year to help cover WKU’s state fire and tornado insurance, which Smith said has increased “a significant amount.”

The bill also includes a new round of asset preservation funding worth \$28.5 million each year, which will not require a match from comprehensive universities such as WKU.

It also provides \$160 million for the construction of a new Academic Complex, which Caboni said is the largest capital appropriation in WKU's history.

Smith said she expects to see the Senate version of the bill "within the next week or two."

Caboni said he is thankful for the increased base funding and asset preservation funding, which he said will help transform historic Cherry Hall in the coming years, but the university hopes to see an increase in base funding in the second year after the Senate's contribution.

"You never get everything you asked for in the legislative session," Caboni said. "I just choose to stay on the positive side of where we are and making sure that we're helping explain to the Senate why an additional 3% in the second year would be really helpful for us, so we continue to work behind the scenes."

HB630 permits WKU to offer up to five doctoral programs related to workforce economic needs in Kentucky.

Smith said a 2011 bill set a doctoral program cap of three for comprehensive universities. It received an amendment in 2017 to remove the cap, but the change also forbade comprehensive universities from offering certain doctoral programs.

HB630 would amend that legislation to allow WKU to offer these programs, opening opportunities to increase research funding and expenditure, Caboni said.

Caboni said these programs will focus on subjects like data sciences and computational sciences, things that “directly connect to our economy” and the work done at WKU’s Innovation Campus.

“It’s a complete departure, but this will amp up our research dollars and eventually we’ll become a Research-2 university,” Caboni said.

Smith also discussed HB9 and SB6, which aim to limit diversity, equity and inclusion measures across higher education.

SB6 forbids several “discriminatory concepts” from being endorsed in a university setting and requires universities provide resources on the First Amendment at student orientations and online.

It also requires all “DEI employees” make an effort to further support “intellectual disabilities amongst most students and faculty” and requires they spend 50% of their time mentoring Pell Grant-eligible students, Smith said.

SB6 was received in the House roughly two weeks ago but has not yet been referred to a committee for a hearing.

Smith said HB9 shares many similarities with SB6 but “goes much further in all its prohibitions of programs, services and classes, everything that we can provide on campus.”

The bill would essentially ban all DEI initiatives across Kentucky’s public universities and colleges.

“I always have the hardest time talking about HB9 because there’s so much in it, we could probably still be here tomorrow if I were to go into detail about everything here,” Smith said.

She said it has been referred to the House Education Committee but has so far not received a hearing.

“We’re very early in this process, so until we know what the final bills passed look like, it’ll really be up to our attorney to give guidance to the university on exactly what this will do and all the different rules and guidelines that we have to follow,” Smith said.



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