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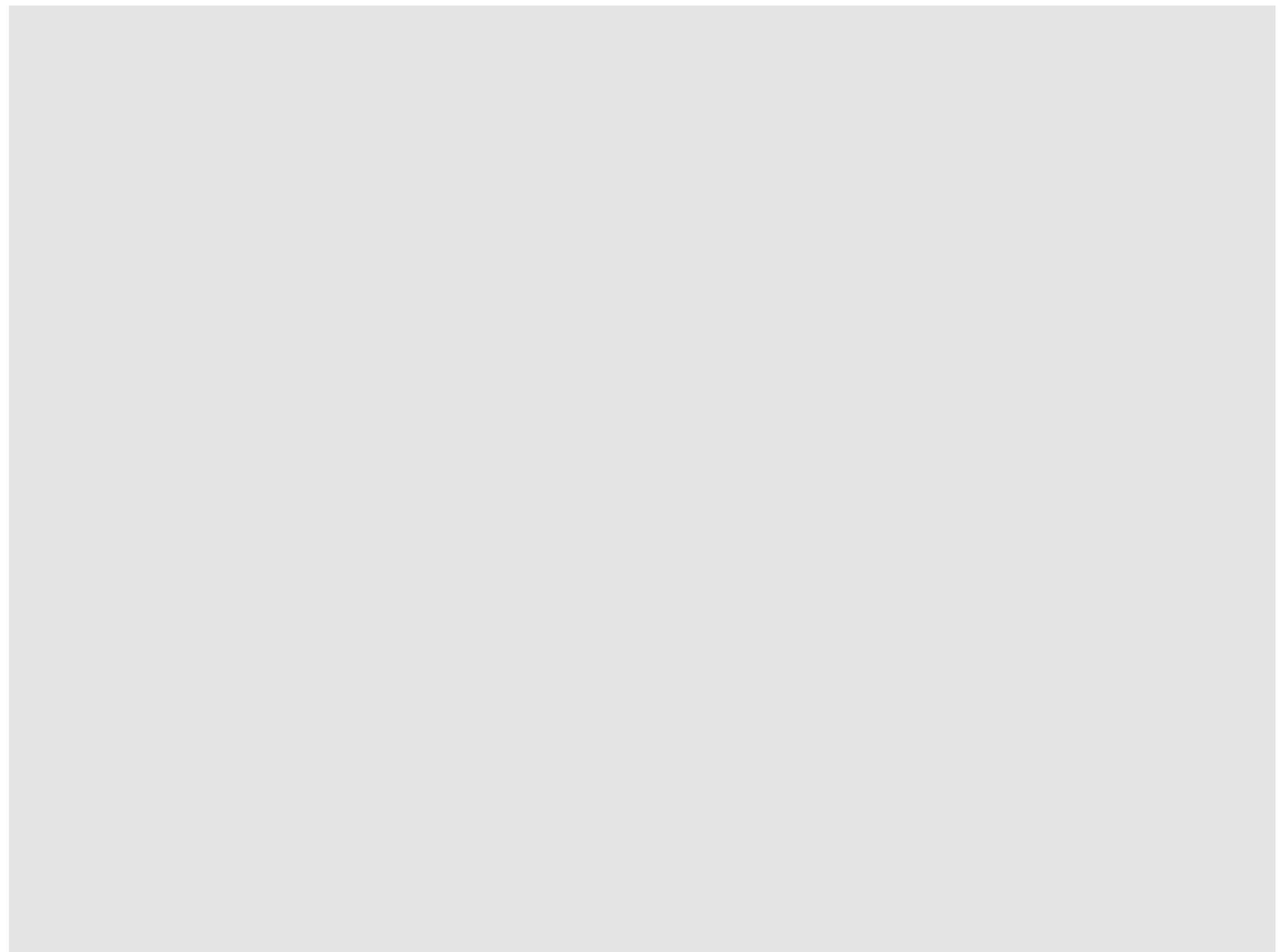
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## WKU retention aided by policy change

By AARON MUDD [amudd@bgdailynews.com](mailto:amudd@bgdailynews.com) Feb 9, 2019



Timothy Caboni

Austin Anthony

Western Kentucky University has been touting recent gains in retaining students through efforts like streamlining advising and retooling financial aid. But some of the increased retention stems from a change related to allowing students who are overdue on university bills to register for classes.

Last semester, WKU largely dropped a policy that kept students from registering for the following semester's classes if they were carrying outstanding balances. While some still owed tuition, most students were locked out of registering because of minor overdue fees.

WKU officials declined to say exactly how much of the increased retention was due to that change.

Brian Kuster, WKU's vice president for enrollment and student experience, said the unpaid bills could range from an unpaid parking ticket to a course-change fee or other bills students might have incurred since attending.

"One student owed six cents and had a hold so they couldn't register," Kuster told the Daily News. While students worked out payments, they missed out on registering for important classes that filled up quickly, Kuster said.

Now, Kuster said, the university no longer puts registration holds on students with a past due balance of \$1,000 or less.

The change is having an impact on hundreds of students, Kuster said.

In October, when the policy was changed, Kuster estimated there were close to 600 students who would have been affected by the policy.

But because of the change "They were able to register on time and have the biggest selection of classes to continue their education," Kuster said.

In early December, Kuster said, there were 396 students with outstanding balances less than \$1,000. Since then, about half have been able to pay off those balances, Kuster said. When classes began this spring, 215 students had unpaid balances, he said.

On Friday, when Assistant Vice President for Student Success Christopher Jensen discussed new retention efforts with the university's Board of Regents, he described a micro-grant program that helped some students reduce their outstanding balances. In one case, WKU awarded 22 micro-grants to underrepresented minority students to help them reduce their bills below \$1,000.

“That was a huge impact and helped those students,” he said.

For WKU President Timothy Caboni, the policy change is a no-brainer. In a recent interview, he described the idea of a student being barred from registering because of a delinquent parking ticket as “completely absurd.”

“For \$25, we’ve said to a student, ‘You can’t register and come and pay \$5,000 in tuition,’ ” Caboni said. “That is the dumbest business decision I’ve ever heard of.”

Last month, at the start of the spring semester, Caboni announced in a faculty and staff email that more first-year students returned to the Hill for their second semester this year than in 2017.

“Our first- to second-semester persistence rate for the fall 2018 first-time, first-year student cohort is up 4 percent to 86.5 percent from 82.5 percent when compared with 2017,” Caboni wrote in the message, referring to this year’s class.

While cautioning that the retention numbers were preliminary, Caboni wrote that the university also saw “even larger gains” of low-income, first-generation and underrepresented minority students in this academic year’s first-time, first-year class.

“This builds on the first to second year persistence gains we realized this past fall,” he added.

Asked how influential the financial policy change was on the retention increase, Caboni said “There are a range of strategies that we’ve put in place to ensure that folks can be successful.”

Part of that includes efforts to adopt “centralized advising,” Caboni said.



“Meaning, advising is not just about course taking. It’s about all of the other support structures that young people need to be successful,” he said. The university’s advising process now includes mental health referrals if needed, as one example, Caboni said.

Additionally, Caboni said WKU has changed how it offers financial aid to help bridge the gap between what students in need can and can’t afford. When students leave school, he said, the reason is most often about finances.

“The honest truth is that there are students that we’ve admitted that are more able to afford the WKU experience now than in previous years because we’ve shifted our aid strategy,” he said.

And with more low-income, first-generation and underrepresented minority students, Caboni said WKU is doing a better job of helping them navigate the college experience.

In his previous email, he credited new retention efforts such as the Kelly M. Burch Institute and the Intercultural Student Engagement Center, which were “designed to help students make progress to graduation through a combination of support, engagement and mentorship,” he wrote.

In speaking with the Daily News, Caboni framed the registration policy change as just one of many efforts to improve retention.

“We need a business model that’s focused on the success of our students and getting them to graduation,” Caboni said. “Not collecting \$25 in parking fees.”

Like Caboni, Kuster framed the policy change as just one factor influencing the retention rate increase.

He credited improvements to advising and more faculty participation in fifth week assessments of students, which evaluate students’ academic performance and offer a chance to take corrective action. Closing WKU’s University College and bringing those students back into the campus community has also helped, Kuster said.

In general, Kuster said campus stakeholders understand it’s their job to recruit, retain and graduate students.

“People understand it’s one student at a time and those relationships are important,” he said.

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## Aaron Mudd

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