



WKU PRESIDENT TIMOTHY C. CABONI

Timothy C. Caboni, a 1994 Western Kentucky University graduate, returned to the Hill on July 1, 2017, as WKU's 10th president. Shortly after assuming the president role, President Caboni launched a comprehensive strategic planning process aimed at developing a roadmap for the University's next decade of growth. Thus, WKU's 2018-2028 strategic plan, *Climbing to Greater Heights*, was finalized in summer 2018. In 2025, President Caboni implemented a review of the strategic plan to reflect on lessons learned, new possibilities and evolving institutional aspirations. The resulting strategic plan extension, introduced in 2026, is informed by a rapidly evolving higher education environment shaped by demographic change, heightened expectations for accountability, fiscal shifts and technological advancement.

Upon his arrival to WKU, President Caboni quickly generated a renewed institutional focus on student-centeredness, applied research, recruitment, retention and growing partnerships within WKU's 27-county service region and beyond. Of particular importance to President Caboni is WKU's responsibility to advance the City of Bowling Green, the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the world by inspiring innovation, elevating communities and transforming lives.

A number of key initiatives have launched during President Caboni's tenure at WKU, including the Summer Scholars program, the Intercultural Student Engagement Center Academy, the Burch Institute, the First Year Village and associated Living Learning Communities, the First Gen program, the Commons at Helm Library, the Opportunity Fund, the Innovation Campus, centralized advising, a revised institutional scholarship program, a comprehensive academic program review and revised admissions standards. The intentional groundwork laid through the strategic plan and these initiatives, supported by collective University-wide efforts under President Caboni's leadership, has generated significant positive momentum and record-breaking successes at WKU.

Since his arrival in 2017, President Caboni has overseen campus improvement projects totaling nearly \$655 million. In 2018, he dedicated Ogden College Hall, which houses most of WKU's science disciplines. He championed the construction of WKU's First Year Village, which opened in fall 2021 and is home to many of the University's Living Learning Communities (LLCs). Additionally, the Commons at Helm Library opened its doors to the campus community in the spring 2022 semester. This unique, modern multipurpose facility transformed a traditional campus library into an intellectual hub where students, faculty and staff gather to share ideas and engage in active learning.

In the fall of 2023, WKU opened its new Soccer/Softball Complex, forever changing the operations of the University's women's soccer and softball teams. The Hilltop Restoration Project, including the newly dedicated Garrett Plaza, was completed in summer 2024, making the area more accessible, providing outdoor space for the community to gather and returning the top of the Hill to founding President Henry Hardin Cherry's original vision. In fall 2025, the University dedicated Amy and David Chandler Hall, the home of the Gordon Ford College of Business, to support business instruction throughout the region and prepare the next generation of business professionals. In spring 2026, WKU opened the Tim and Sarah Ford Fieldhouse, which provides space for the institution's award-winning forensics team, Big Red Marching Band, e-sports team and Athletics. In May 2025, President Caboni announced a significant investment in Cherry Hall to restore the University's most iconic building to its original grandeur while positioning it to support future generations of Hilltoppers; reopening is planned for fall 2027. Finally, the University will soon break ground on a replacement for its Academic Complex, made possible by a \$160 million appropriation from the Kentucky General Assembly, the largest capital project appropriation in WKU's history. The Academic Complex currently serves as the home of the College of Health and Human Services and WKU Public Media.

President Caboni oversaw the development of a landmark agreement with Gilbane, a national construction and real estate development company, to launch a public-private partnership (P3) aimed at completely reimagining the future of campus housing at WKU. The initiative, known as Elevate WKU, represents one of the most ambitious capital projects in the University's history and is designed to transform the residential experience for generations of Hilltoppers. Phase 1 of the project includes a \$350 million investment to construct a modern 1,000-bed residential facility, with anticipated opening in fall 2028, while also providing critical upgrades and renovations to existing housing infrastructure across campus.

President Caboni also guided the transformation of the University's 285,000-square-foot Center for Research and Development into an Innovation Campus – an environment where students, staff and faculty connect with entrepreneurs, industry leaders and business resources to create jobs, develop talent pipelines and propel the region's economy. Numerous local, national and global companies, such as Kentucky to the World, Logan Aluminum, Holley Performance Products, Stupp Fiber, Lunae and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have since established a presence at the University's Innovation Campus, and WKU students are benefitting from the opportunity to research, create and learn alongside industry leaders.

At the start of his third year on the Hill, President Caboni announced bold changes to the University's scholarship program, increasing institutional aid by \$5.2 million. The revamped freshman scholarship model, coupled with aggressive affordability marketing and outreach, has led to more than 90% of the incoming class receiving merit awards to help fund their education (rising from 39% in 2019).

Throughout his presidency, President Caboni's emphasis on hands-on student learning has been on full display. He regularly participated in the Leadership and Communication Living Learning Community, engaging with students through thoughtful and meaningful interactions. He was honored as the 2024-2025 Administrator of the Year by the Kentucky Music Educators Association (KMEA) in recognition of his work with WKU's music programs - especially the Big Red Marching Band, the largest collegiate marching band in the Commonwealth.

From the 2016-17 academic year to the 2024-25 academic year, overall student retention increased 9.5 percentage points (69.9% to 79.4%). Retention of Underrepresented Minority (URM) students increased 14.3 percentage points (57.8% to 72.1%) during that time, and low-income student retention increased 14 percentage points (60.2% to 74.2%). The 2024-2025 academic year saw the highest retention rates in WKU history for all students (79.4%) as well as for low-income students (74.2%).

Western Kentucky University's fall 2025 first-time, first-year class returned the following spring in record fashion. Overall, 91% of first-time, first-year students who were enrolled at WKU for the fall 2025 semester returned in spring 2026, a 4.7 percentage point increase since the 2017-18 academic year. Fall-to-spring retention of first-time, first-year students has increased nearly five percentage points since 2018. Additionally, since 2018, the University has experienced a fall-to-spring retention increase of approximately 5.7 percentage points among first-time, first-year students who identify as the first in their family to attend college. With President Caboni at the helm, more students are choosing WKU because it's been made more attractive and more accessible than ever before; more students stay and complete their degrees because of the growth and enhancement of its targeted student-support structure; and more graduates are choosing to remain in Kentucky because of the growing partnerships in the University's 27-county service region and beyond.

Under President Caboni's leadership, the University has also experienced significant fundraising success. Shortly after arriving at WKU in 2017, he announced the creation of the WKU Opportunity Fund, an effort to support WKU students experiencing financial difficulties. The fund surpassed its initial goal of \$50 million, and in 2021, President Caboni announced an even more ambitious \$100 million goal. Ultimately, the Opportunity Fund grew to \$102.4 million and led to the creation of 267 endowed scholarships. Under President Caboni's leadership, the University has experienced five of the most successful fundraising years in its history.

During his presidency, WKU Athletics has experienced remarkable success. Since his arrival on campus, Hilltopper programs have captured 27 Conference USA (CUSA) team championships across eight sports and 25 individual titles from five additional programs. Academically, WKU student-athletes have excelled as well, setting department records for the number of honorees on the CUSA Commissioner's Honor Roll and recipients of the Commissioner's Academic Medal. In fall 2025 and spring 2026, they achieved a program-best 3.32 cumulative GPA.

President Caboni also played a pivotal role in guiding CUSA through a critical period of realignment while serving as Chair of the CUSA Board of Directors from October 2021 to May 2024—the longest tenure in league history. During this time, he helped stabilize the conference, laying the foundation for long-term success and a return to 12 full-time members by July 1, 2025. He also led negotiations for a new multimedia rights agreement focused on accessibility, strategic scheduling, national exposure (both linear and digital) and increased revenue.

Before becoming Chair, President Caboni joined the CUSA Executive Committee in 2019 and was named Vice Chair in June 2021. His national influence extended to his service on the College Football Playoff Board of Managers, where he contributed to the expansion of the playoff from four to 12 teams.