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## WKU president enters second year with confidence

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Western Kentucky University president Tim Caboni answers questions Friday, August 24, 2018, during an interview at Craig Administration Center. (Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Bac Totrong/Daily News

After a year of budget cuts and staffing reductions, Western Kentucky University Timothy Caboni is setting a brighter tone in his second year on the job.

Speaking with the Daily News in an interview Friday, Caboni touched on several critical topics affecting students and staff, including whether the university will need to make serious budget cuts again.

“I’m confident this is going to be a different year,” Caboni said, adding he’s excited the university can begin implementing a new vision with its recently approved strategic plan. “For about a year, folks were asking me, ‘Well, what’s your vision? What’s your vision?’ ... This is not just my vision for WKU, but it’s our shared aspirations for the institution.”

However, Caboni’s first year as president also came with some tough choices. The university cut almost 150 positions during multiple rounds of staffing cuts last spring, and in June its Board of Regents approved a budget with nearly \$30 million in spending cuts.

Speaking Friday, Caboni had good news.

“Given what we’ve projected for our freshmen enrollment and continuing enrollment, we’re right on target. We did the vast majority of the hard work last year, and because of that this should be a year where the campus focuses on the strategic plan” and other priorities, Caboni said.

“We have some stability now,” he said, stressing the need to do better with student retention going forward. “By next fall, we must do better with retention. Our first to second-year students have to persist at a higher rate. We have to recruit more aggressively. And we have to think about how we make sure we leverage our financial aid to have as many students in that first-year class, who are not just going to be in that first-year class, but are going to graduate here.

“It’s a year for us not to be concerned with, or consumed by, budget issues. It’s really a time to look forward and attack the strategic plan and its implementation head on,” Caboni said, describing the possibility of further cuts as “unlikely.”

WKU expects to be down 525 students this year, with no increase in its entering freshman class, according to an executive summary of WKU’s 2018-19 budget. The biggest drivers of the shortfall are fewer undergraduate and graduate international students, part-time resident graduate and full-time resident undergraduate students.

In June, WKU’s Board of Regents also approved a 4 percent tuition hike and a \$50 increase to an online course fee, bringing the total to a \$150 per-credit-hour fee.

Caboni said he expects students will see a smaller tuition increase next year.

That’s largely because the state has capped tuition increases at 6 percent over a two-year period, and WKU took the maximum allowed in any one year with its 4 percent tuition increase.

The university cannot set raise tuition higher than 2 percent next year, and Caboni didn’t rule out that option in speaking to the Daily News on Friday.

“We’ll see where we are in the spring semester, and that’s really important. You don’t want to take any options off the table,” he said, adding the university is focused on financial aid for struggling students.

When asked if the \$50 increase to the online course fee was counterintuitive to attracting more adult students seeking to finish degrees, Caboni said the move was necessary to help stabilize WKU’s budget. Going forward, he said the university will review its fee structure this year.

“To my mind, it is entirely too complex and convoluted,” he said.



He stressed a new Workforce Administration bachelor's degree program, that adult students can complete online in 15 months, as a way for adults to finish their degrees and advance professionally. The program focuses on high-demand fields throughout Kentucky, such as health care, manufacturing and information technology.

Students are paying more in tuition to finance a 4 percent salary increase pool for faculty and staff this year.

On Friday, during his annual faculty and staff convocation, Caboni said that all employees hired on or before July 1 this year will receive a 2 percent salary increase Jan. 1 and will be eligible for up to a 4 percent merit increase.

Caboni sees the increase as a win for faculty and staff.

“Faculty and staff have said to me, since the day I set foot on this campus, we have not had meaningful raises in a decade. There have been raises but they have been incremental,” he said, adding some individuals could see a 6 percent increase or more to their salaries. “That’s the way you improve morale.”

Caboni also addressed how WKU has become a smaller campus staff-wise.

“I understand that we went through some job loss. But the reality is this university was thousands of students smaller in terms of full-time, fully enrolled, on-campus students than we were several years ago,” he said. “As painful as it was, bringing our staffing levels down to where they should be will allow us to do things like have meaningful raises.”

Department heads and supervisors will make recommendations to deans and division vice presidents about who should receive merit increases and how much, Caboni said.

“We want those decisions made as close to the actual work being done as possible,” he said.

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