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WKU gears up for enrollment push despite decline in HS grads

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 22 hrs ago



Timothy Caboni

Facing an enrollment decline, Western Kentucky University is working to persuade as many admitted students as possible to stick around for classes next fall – despite fewer Kentucky high school graduates to recruit.

“As we enter the yield season of the admission process, the individual engagement of our faculty, staff and academic programs is the most persuasive way to inform students of the advantages of the WKU Experience,” President Timothy Caboni wrote in an email to faculty and staff last week.

Last fall, WKU’s enrollment report showed sharp drops for both in-state and international students.

Now, with fewer in-state students to recruit, WKU must make its pitch in a tight labor market with a glut of open jobs and growing wages, even while other state schools chase the same goal.

Jace Lux, WKU’s director of admissions, said all of this has formed a “perfect storm” and spurred the university into rethinking recruitment efforts.

WKU has recruited more in the deep south, where the number of high school graduates is expected to increase, and has even tapped alumni as far away as Hawaii to visit high schools there, Lux said.

Closer to home, WKU offers certain tuition incentives to students in Tennessee, which Lux said has led to an uptick in students from there. In the fall, WKU held recruitment events in the Nashville area, and it recently held a reception there that brought young alumni and potential students together.

“They do make a difference. Those personal connections are really what we’re focusing on as an institution,” Lux said.

But the issue is bigger than simply fewer high school graduates to recruit. As Caboni noted in his campus message, fewer students are interested in attending college.

“Among the 40 high schools in our immediate service area, 40 percent reported a decline in the percentage of their graduating seniors going on to college. We are seeing evidence of this trend at WKU.



“Among the students who were admitted but did not enroll in the fall 2018 term, 52.4 percent (3,190) ended up not enrolling at any post-secondary institution – an increase of more than 12 percent (345) in just two years,” Caboni wrote.

Lux said he’s seen perceptions about higher education shift among families. Families are becoming more concerned about the cost and thinking about college as an expense, he said.

Perhaps now more than ever, WKU must convince families of the value of four-year college degrees.

“We must convince parents and their students that a college degree not only creates an opportunity to make a good living, but it also prepares our graduates to make a good life, for themselves and those around them,” Caboni wrote.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

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