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TOP STORY

WKU to remove ACT requirement for most scholarships through \$5M aid expansion

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni welcomes faculty and staff back to campus Monday during his annual convocation address at Van Meter Hall. His speech kicks off a week of events ahead of the start of classes next Monday.

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Seeking to stand out among its competitors both in and out of state, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni made a pitch Tuesday to high school students looking for ways to pay for college.

“For students who want a scholarship to WKU, get a 3.0 (grade-point average) in high school and you’ve won a scholarship,” Caboni said, announcing several changes to the university’s scholarship offerings during a briefing with reporters Tuesday.

Beginning next fall, WKU will no longer use ACT scores to award most academic merit-based and targeted scholarships for incoming freshmen, according to a news release announcing the changes.

The university will also make an extra \$5.2 million in scholarship support available by expanding offers to high school students with an unweighted GPA of 3.0 or higher, down from the previous bar of a 3.3 GPA.

The minimum award amount for those scholarships will also increase from \$1,500 to \$2,500 per year. Caboni said those scholarships will be awarded automatically to eligible students.

“If you have a 3.0, and you apply to WKU, you are automatically eligible for a \$2,500 scholarship, and that grows as your GPA goes up,” Caboni told reporters Tuesday.

WKU spokesman Bob Skipper told the Daily News that students can qualify for that award as long as they are freshmen entering their first semester of college. Officials also said the award is not limited based on residency, meaning out-of-state and international students are also eligible.

Asked by a reporter about a cap on aid dependent upon how many students apply or get admitted, Caboni said “I’ll tell you this: If we get 20,000 students to apply with a 3.0, all 20,000 of them will get a scholarship. Period. It doesn’t matter. So we want to open the floodgates and provide as much opportunity as we possibly can.”

The changes will also mean additional scholarship opportunities for minority students. That's because WKU is also expanding its Cornelius A. Martin Scholarship.

In an email, Skipper wrote that the scholarship currently awards \$2,500 for eligible minority students with a 3.0 GPA and a 20 on their ACT.

In fall of 2020, however, the award will increase to \$3,000 with a GPA of 3.0 and above and \$2,000 for those with a high school GPA between 2.5 and 2.9.

Taken together, Caboni said the changes “essentially double the number of undergraduate students who are eligible for aid.”

“This year, about 39 percent of our students received some sort of merit aid. Our calculations are that next fall, 80 percent of WKU first-year students will receive scholarship aid,” he said.

The roughly \$5 million used in the initiative comes in part from tuition discounts and from private support raised through the WKU Opportunity Fund campaign.



“In the past two years, we’ve raised over \$27 million to support scholarships, retention and graduation initiatives and we have 72 new scholarship funds, all of which will help defray some of this cost,” Caboni said.

Explaining the reasoning behind the change, Caboni said that, for students seeking a four-year college degree, their chances for completion are five times greater if they start at WKU rather than a

community college.

Cost is a barrier for those students, Caboni said, adding WKU has been working for more than a year to target students who are the “most needy and most deserving of financial support.”

Dropping ACT score requirements from most scholarships also signifies “that we’re going to place the emphasis on performance over four years of high school instead of one day of testing,” Caboni said.

To be clear, ACT scores will still be considered in several scholarships, including the university’s more prestigious scholarship offerings, such as the Cherry Presidential Scholarship.

These new changes represent an effort by WKU to lower its “net cost,” Caboni said. That’s the total cost of attendance weighed against the total amount of aid an individual student can receive.

Caboni put the university’s net cost at about \$11,000 per year. WKU’s current undergraduate resident tuition is \$5,401 per semester.

“The hope is more students will begin their careers at WKU and think about us as an affordable alternative to other institutions,” Caboni said.

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

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