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WKU students join Frankfort 'Rally for Higher

Education'

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com
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Western Kentucky University's Student Government Association members join WKU President Timothy Caboni on Tuesday in Frankfort.

Photo courtesy of Will Harris

They came from different campuses, but groups of Kentucky college students spoke in a unified voice Tuesday as they rallied in Frankfort to support increased state spending on higher education – the cost of which has increasingly fallen on their shoulders.

"Seeing all the students together, that's a powerful thing," said Will Harris, Western Kentucky University's student body president. "We're all together, and we're all fighting for the same thing,"

Harris led a contingent of about 25 students from WKU's Student Government Association to join other student government groups representing public and private colleges across the state.

At a rally in the Capitol's rotunda and in office visits with lawmakers, students pushed for more state dollars to be invested in a performance funding pool for higher education. Additional money to assist college campuses with deferred maintenance projects and shielding schools from costly pension rate hikes were also high on their list of priorities.

WKU students also teamed up with WKU President Timothy Caboni, who has made frequent trips to Frankfort as lawmakers craft a two-year state budget. In January, while issuing his budget request, Gov. Andy Beshear called for a 1 percent spending increase on Kentucky's public colleges and universities.

But that increase, amounting to an additional $8.6 million in 2021, doesn't go far enough to roll back cuts to higher education made since 2008, according to the left-leaning Kentucky Center for Economic Policy. Funding for higher education institutions will still be $219 million behind 2008 levels, not accounting for inflation, the center's executive director Jason Bailey wrote in a recent brief.



"It's a really important time for students to be raising this issue in Frankfort," Ashley Spalding, the center's research director, said in an interview Tuesday.

House lawmakers are expected to come out with their own budget proposal this week, she noted.

Accounting for inflation, Spalding said the decline in state support between 2008 and 2020 amounts to a 35 percent cut to the higher education institutions. She noted a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which ranked Kentucky the eighth worst in the nation in college affordability last year, measured in terms of average tuition and fees at public, four-year universities as a share of median income. What's more, when colleges become less affordable, students of color and those who are low-income are hit especially hard, Spalding said.

"More of the cost of our public institutions is being shipped to the students," Spalding said.

She called on state lawmakers to rein in tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy to raise more revenue. "We could make these investments in education. ... It is possible."

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