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## WKU regents look at tuition, budget issues

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As Western Kentucky University watches for the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education to set the annual cap on tuition rate increases later this month, the agency has told WKU and other colleges across the state that it will aim to offer them “maximum flexibility.”

That was one business item WKU’s Board of Regents discussed Friday when it met in committees, with the meeting facilitated through video-conferencing due to the ongoing pandemic. During the meeting, the university’s chief financial officer, Susan Howarth, offered a snapshot of where the university’s fiscal year 2022 budget currently stands.



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“Any projected shortfall that we have – meaning our expenditures are over our revenues – I will first say, it’s below what we dealt with in this year,” Howarth told the board.

Spurred on by the pandemic, the university tightened its belt, using temporary salary cuts for faculty and staff and buyouts for senior employees as one key tactic to address a \$27 million budget deficit.

“We’re not looking at anything close to that,” in the budget currently in development, Howarth said.

Howarth said the university’s departments and divisions will get to choose how they manage any so-called, one-time “soft reduction targets.”

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“They can use every tool they have in the toolbox,” Howarth said of making any potential spending cuts. “That would be lapse salary, travel reductions, procurement reductions, hiring pauses – but again, that would be up to the individual deans and vice presidents. It would be more of a bottom-up approach than a top-down.”

Faculty Regent Shane Spiller and Staff Regent David Brinkley took the opportunity to make the case for raises for faculty and staff, arguing that years of lagging behind market rates have flattened morale.

Spiller noted that the university has continued to hire new personnel at market-rate salaries while deferring raises for its existing employees.

“Everyone I’ve hired in the last 15 years – including the person who will start next semester – will make more money than me,” said Spiller, a professor of management in the university’s Gordon Ford Business College.

Brinkley noted that, apart from some university administrations, “everyone else on campus has not had but one cost-of-living adjustment in the last dozen years.”

“Given the positive financial report, couple that with the lower reduction targets ... I would hope there would be an across-the-board,” increase, Brinkley said.

In response, WKU President Timothy Caboni hinted at that as a possibility. An internal university group that helps shape WKU’s budget has explored ways to resolve compensation issues, and WKU is also studying competitive pay, Caboni said.

“I think the community will be pleased, and I hope it will be pleased, with where we wind up,” Caboni said.

During the meeting, Howarth also gave an update on the number of senior employees who have currently accepted a buyout offer from the university. (Faculty and staff still have until Tuesday to opt-out before the deal is sealed.)

Currently, 125 employees have accepted the offer and will receive one year's salary in exchange for parting ways with the university. Seventy-three of the people are designated staff, while 52 are faculty. Of the individuals, 55 are female and 45 male. Most are white (65 individuals), while three are African American men and eight are African American women. Another two are American Indian/Alaskan Native men and one is a Hispanic woman, according to figures Howarth presented.

Much of the university's financial fate will come down to what kind of cap the Council on Postsecondary Education sets on tuition and fee increases. (Tuition and fee revenue makes up 46% of the university's total revenue in its current fiscal year operating budget, for example.) The CPE is expected to make a decision about tuition and fee rate increases when it meets April 16.

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Howarth also added that the university will need to determine a fee for distance learning courses, which were suspended during the pandemic and as WKU pivoted to delivering many of its courses remotely. The university also held off on raising tuition last year.

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