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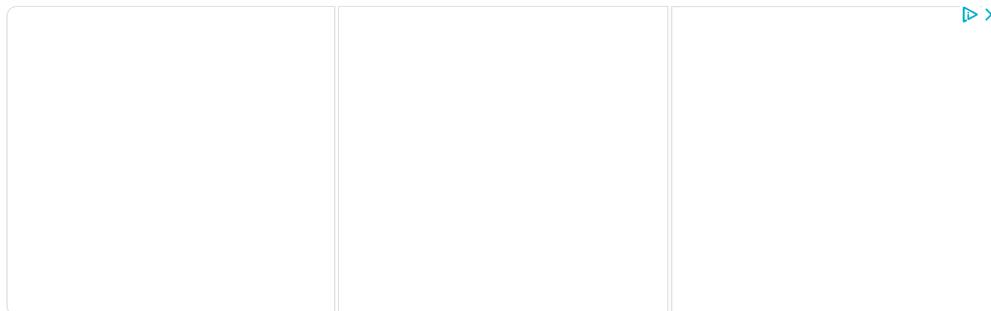
WKU regents pass budget, 2% tuition hike for undergrads

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com

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Western Kentucky University's Board of Regents approved Friday a \$375 million campus operating budget, which requires about \$9 million in spending cuts to become balanced over the course of the next fiscal year that begins July 1.

Budget documents presented to the board put the total spending reductions at \$9,160,032, with the bulk of cuts – a combined sum of \$6,487,358 – falling on the campus' academic affairs and support units and across the university. WKU's administrative support units, in contrast, will shoulder a smaller share of the reductions: \$2,672,674.



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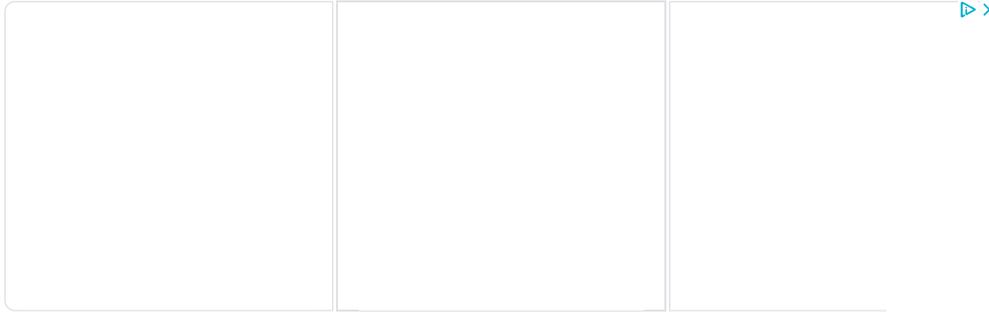
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Defending the spending cuts, campus administrators told regents the university is progressing toward its perennial goal of achieving a balanced budget.

Setting aside the fiscal year 2021 budget, which included a plan to cut more than \$27 million in spending as the coronavirus pandemic escalated, campus officials argued WKU has made progress in reducing the size of these budget cuts year after year.

"We've made tremendous strides at bringing that number down," WKU President Timothy Caboni told the board Friday.

Susan Howarth, the university's chief budget and finance officer, echoed that perspective.



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“The COVID year was a difficult year,” she said. As it continues to implement a new, more decentralized budgeting approach, Howarth said WKU must “crawl, walk, run” toward a balanced budget: “I think we’re going to be in full run mode,” going forward, she said.

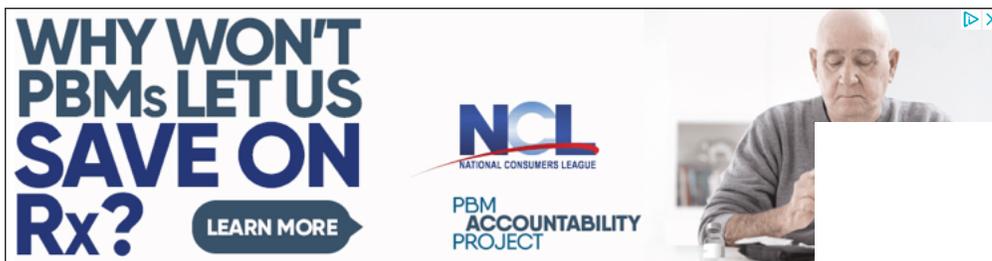
This is because, administrators said, WKU is continuing a yearslong struggle to wean itself off of so-called “carry forward” dollars – money that is created by campus divisions through cost-cutting measures and carried over into the next fiscal year – as a crucial budget-balancing tactic.

The tactic is effective, but it does come at a cost, WKU Faculty Regent Shane Spiller said Friday.

Addressing the more than \$27 million in spending reductions imposed by the fiscal year 2021 budget, Spiller said “the way we generated that was through tight budgetary controls,” which faculty and staff across the university had to make work.

That approach, Spiller said, “quite honestly at times shifted the cost of the activities that the faculty and staff were doing to the faculty and staff themselves,” citing examples of employees who had to purchase webcams with money out of their own pockets to facilitate working from home during the pandemic.

He asked the university to consider granting a one-time “retention bonus” to faculty and staff who managed to weather the storm.



“We have to find a way to spur innovation,” Spiller said, adding that the innovation the university has encouraged with its budget policies has been “innovation in budget cuts.”

“We need to find a way to grow out of this,” Spiller said. “As we hire our new deans and new provost, you know, hopefully the first thing we don’t tell them is ‘Ok, welcome. Now, cut your budget.’ ”

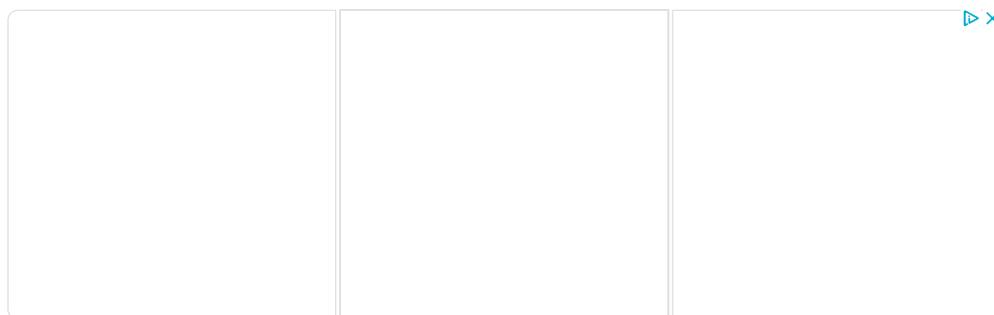
The university depends on tuition and fees for nearly half of its total operating budget revenue, and because the spending plan also includes a 2% tuition hike for undergraduate students, they will contribute an even larger share going forward.

Graduate tuition is not changing, Howarth noted.

The 2% tuition hike on the previous per-semester rate of \$5,401 translates to an increase of \$108.02, making the new rate \$5,509.02.

WKU will, however, permanently do away with its distance learning fee – \$150 per credit hour for online courses. The fee was previously suspended for the 2020-21 academic year, but now the university is making that change permanent.

Additional revenue raised by increasing tuition will go toward funding raises for faculty and staff, as Caboni recently explained to campus employees during a Staff Senate meeting earlier this month.



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“I was very clear with (Howarth) that one of our priorities this year was going to be how do we create a pool of dollars for increases – a 2% pool,” Caboni said, explaining the various budget “trade-offs” needed to make that happen.

“I’ll give you an example,” he told the Staff Senate. “There is a \$4 million line in the proposed budget around eliminating a distance learning fee. It’s not just a \$4 million line. That’s \$4 million that we have to find and apply to that line,” he said. “So you could say that a 2% tuition increase – which generates about \$2 million in additional revenue – could be applied to that \$4 million hole, and then we would only need \$2 million to fill it completely.”

As part of shaping the university’s spending plan, a budget development group “also made a choice that we’re going to have a 2% raise pool, but also a 2% tuition increase given the \$4 million decline in fee revenue,” Caboni said.

WKU opted to take a 2% tuition hike this year after Kentucky’s Council on Postsecondary Education voted in May to cap tuition increases for public universities at no more than 3% over a two-year period – and no more than 2% in any one year. WKU decided to forego raising tuition last year amid the escalating coronavirus pandemic.

The separate WKU capital projects budget includes a total of \$65.5 million. Big-ticket projects, several of which are already underway, include demolishing Tate Page Hall (\$6 million), razing Garrett Conference Center (\$7 million) and the extensive renovation of the university’s library

into the new WKU Commons set to open this fall (\$38.5 million). It's worth noting that the numbers are cost estimates, and the university has received permission to spend up to those amounts of state money.

“The numbers that you see here are the authorized or authorization amounts from the state of Kentucky,” WKU Chief Facilities Officer Bryan Russell told the board. “As an example, demolishing Tate Page Hall is actually less than \$2 million.”

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