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Facing retirement, Potter College dean reflects on decades at WKU

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Larry Snyder
Submitted

It's been a wild ride for Potter College of Arts and Letters Dean Larry Snyder, who plans to retire in June after more than 30 years at Western Kentucky University.

Since first setting foot in WKU's Cherry Hall in 1990 as the newest member of the university's religious studies faculty, Snyder has seen higher education undergo a reformation that included waning state spending in Kentucky and a shift in how people view higher education.

From Snyder's view as a longtime administrator at WKU and a professor admired by his students, higher education has gone from being a public good and an

investment to a milestone that families are supposed to finance mainly on their own.

“We exist for the public good, and part of that is providing education in areas that folks may not otherwise be exposed to,” Snyder said of higher education. “It’s essential to maintaining a civil society and a well-functioning democracy.”

A recent report from the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy said Kentucky ranks among the 10 worst states nationally for higher education cuts since before the Great Recession, with lawmakers spending nearly 30%, or \$2,977, less per student in 2019 than in 2008.

That far outstrips the national average decline of 11.6% or \$1,033 per student, according to the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy,

Snyder calls that short-sighted and a “huge mistake,” one that Kentucky and other states that have divested from education will “pay a very heavy price for down the line.”

Even now, WKU is preparing to make yet another round of cuts to address a nearly \$8 million budget hole in its upcoming fiscal year budget.

Deans and vice presidents across campus will make these cuts – 54% of which WKU’s academic and support units will shoulder. Since 2016, when Snyder was appointed Potter College dean, he said he has become practiced in making hard decisions.

While budget cycles offer universities the chance to do some soul-searching and reinvent themselves, Snyder said repeated cuts have had a compounding, disheartening effect on faculty, producing a “profound effect on faculty morale.”

“There’s nothing left for us to cut,” Snyder said. “We’re down now to amputating arms and appendages.”

Unfortunately, Snyder said, the current higher education landscape isn’t likely to change anytime soon.

State spending cuts to higher education mean that universities shift part of the difference to students

in the form of tuition hikes, and the most significant cost burden falls on the poor and families of color.

For example, students of color – especially Black students – must borrow more to pay for school. In 2016, 85% of Black graduates across all institution types graduated with debt, compared to 69% of their White peers, the KCEP report said.

“Black students borrow more and struggle more with repayment than their White peers in large part because structural racism holds down Black people’s earnings and wealth accumulation,” the report said.

And because many low-income students and students of color are also first-generation college students – a vital constituency for WKU – that college cost burden could have consequences in the fall of 2021.

“Right now, our applicant pool is down 25% for first-generation students,” WKU President Timothy Caboni told the university’s Board of Regents last week. “They don’t have

anybody at home to help them navigate the college choice process. They haven't had that support from their schools to do that."

WKU offered buy-outs to its senior employees as part of its Voluntary Separation Incentive Program to cut costs.

WKU said the program provides eligible faculty and staff to separate or retire from the university, effective June 30, and get a payout "equal to annualized base salary, up to \$100,000."

Retirement is at his doorstep, but Snyder said he isn't quite ready to slow down completely. Professionally, Snyder said he'd like to keep teaching part-time and possibly get involved in nonprofit work. He aims to follow an interest in immigration and refugee resettlement issues.

"We'll see where it takes me," he said.

As he moves into the next chapter of his life, Snyder said he's most proud of the friendships and relationships

he won while at WKU.

“The relationships that I have built and maintained over the years ... that is what I will be most appreciative of as I walk out the door,” Snyder said.

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