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'A special time in the life of the college:' Ground broken on WKU business building

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Western Kentucky University and state elected officials break ground on South Lawn at the site of the former Tate Page Hall on Wednesday.

PHOTOS BY Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Wednesday was a long day in the making for Western Kentucky University.

Faculty, staff, administration and local representatives gathered in the bright June sun on the former site of Tate Page Hall to break ground on the university's next home for the Gordon Ford College of Business, a 113,000-square-foot capital project that will blend classic Collegiate Georgian architecture with a modern flair.

"I've often said that a great college of business needs a great place in which to do business," WKU President Timothy Caboni said. "And this new facility is that great place."

The structure will feature 21 classrooms, a trading lab with Bloomberg Terminals, a virtual reality simulation space and a three-story atrium representing a student's metaphorical climb through college, all capped off by a copper dome featuring a skylight.

The building will sit next to Jody Richards Hall, home of WKU's School of Media, and the Guthrie Bell Tower. The structure's columned entrance will face out across South Lawn.

"We're losing a little bit of tailgate space, but I think we have plenty on South Lawn so we'll be just fine," Caboni said.

Caboni said conversations about procuring a new home for the business college have been happening for almost 20 years, well before he arrived on the Hill in 2017.

“I remember in my first press conference when I was announced as president, someone asked me about a college of business building,” he said.

It was an emotional morning for Dr. Christopher Shook, who has served as the GFCB dean since 2019. Shook will be leaving WKU to become the dean of the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s Collat School of Business starting July 1.

“I didn’t expect to be this emotional today, I will say that,” he said. “But it’s really a special time in the life of the college. It’s really very bittersweet to be leaving Western — once a Hilltopper, always a Hilltopper — but it’s a chance for me to go home.”

Shook said he was proud to be leaving the college in “much better condition than I found it.”

The new building was made possible thanks to \$74.4 million in funding provided by the General Assembly’s executive branch biennial budget back in 2022. The investment marks the first WKU building to be funded by the state since Ogden College Hall in 2014.

Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman said it took the state legislature, the governor's office and both parties to set aside the project’s funding.

“And that’s when the best things happen,” Coleman said.
“When we all work together to create something that is so needed.”

Coleman said she’d “like to hope” that the building bodes well for other higher education capital projects down the road.



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Sen. David Givens, president pro tempore of the Kentucky Senate and a WKU alumnus, called the investment a selfish one — but in a positive way.

“It’s a selfish investment because we know the leaders who come out of this building will build community, they’ll build revenue for the state, they’ll build strong families and they’ll build strong futures,” Givens said.

The GFCB currently operates out of Grise Hall, which has welcomed students since it was dedicated back in 1967.

Rep. Michael Meredith, a 2007 graduate of the GFCB, said he and his fellow classmates always knew the university was in need of a new business building, referencing Grise Hall’s cinder block walls and touchy climate systems.

“It took three days to a week sometimes to get the climate inside of the building much more comfortable for all of us,” he said.

In contrast to Grise Hall, which lacks seating, study areas and open spaces for collaboration, the business building was designed for flexibility and to facilitate team projects.

“It’s very small and cramped. This (building) has a lobby where we can really be central and businesses can come in and look and see what our students are doing,” he said.

Once the building is complete, the university’s eyes will shift to renovating Cherry Hall.

Faculty and staff currently working out of that building are expected to temporarily relocate to Grise Hall until those renovations are complete. Once Cherry Hall is full again, Grise Hall will have completed its service to WKU.

“In my mind, in 2027 when Cherry Hall is re-occupied, we will celebrate the end of Grise’ useful life and take that down,” Caboni told the Daily News when the business building's renderings were first shown in April.

Caboni said conversations are still ongoing for the structure's name, which will require a \$7.5 philanthropic contribution to the university.

“No news today, but I am hopeful that we have some alumni who believe in this facility and making this investment for us to have a name,” he said.

The building has an opening target of fall 2025. Design was done by Chicago architecture firm Gensler and construction will be handled by Messer Construction Co.

“We’re in the business of changing students' lives. That changes communities and the commonwealth,” Shook said. “And this new building will exacerbate and enhance our abilities to do so, so we’re very excited.”

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