

WKU convocation spans successes, changes, updates

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni delivers the convocation address to WKU faculty and staff inside Van Meter Hall on Monday, August 11, one week before fall semester classes begin. (JACK DOBBS / The Daily News)

BY DAVID MAMARIL HOROWITZ

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Western Kentucky University's president shared a year of recaps and updates with a crowded Van Meter Hall for WKU's Monday convocation and then with the media – spanning numerous indicators of increasing student success, to a new partner with the Innovation Campus, to a push to creatively pursue research funding opportunities amid federal change.

If numbers hold, WKU will acquire an 80.3% first- to second-year retention rate, Caboni said. It's too early for fall enrollment numbers, which will fluctuate for several months, he told media members.

Caboni has championed growing that retention stat to 80% for several years.

The graduation rate has grown 7.2 percentage points, to 57.9%, with students acquiring about a third more undergraduate degrees and credentials than the next-closest comprehensive university statewide, Caboni said.

Meanwhile, the \$102 million Opportunity Fund, which had established 267 endowed scholarships a year ago, funded an additional 57 scholarship endowments last fiscal year. The university also reached an all-time high for fundraising this past year at \$44.5 million.

Federal priorities

While the federal funding landscape "continues to evolve," Caboni said, he is proud of the faculty's pursuit of external support for research, service and scholarly endeavors.

"If you think about the federal funding available to support research, there's a great deal of uncertainty around the future of those funding streams," Caboni told the news media. "In times of uncertainty, creativity and persistence become even more essential. "

WKU's expenditures from externally funded projects in fiscal year 2025 kept pace with those in the previous, he said. WKU has also managed to grow its portfolio of externally funded work, encompassing more than \$20 million, by nearly a million dollars "even in a difficult funding environment," he said.

"I'm confident that we're going to continue to invest as a nation in innovation at our universities, but it's likely to shift based upon the priorities of this administration," he said.

"It's just going to require creativity and thinking differently and making sure we're shifting our work to match those federal funding priorities."

First-gen students, students of color

Asked about Kentucky's new law opposing diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, Caboni said WKU this fall will likely have fewer first-generation students and students of color.

"Because we can't offer scholarships that target, certainly, students of color," he said. "And so what we have to do as a university is figure out what are the broad categories that are allowable within the law, and continue to tweak our efforts to make sure we continue to meet our mission."

The law, passed last legislative session, eliminates DEI initiatives at public universities statewide.

“It’s incumbent upon us to figure this out,” he said. “We’re going to follow the law as a university, and we have to be smart and creative, but we can’t exclude, either, which that law makes (...) very clear.”

Innovation Campus partner

Speaking on the WKU Innovation Campus, Caboni announced that this summer, the university attracted a company that’s an industry leader “ in science and technology commercialization, and carries an extensive track record of securing Small Business Innovation Research funding through multiple ventures.”

WKU will reveal the name in the future, Caboni said.

“Not only is this a tremendous research accelerant for our university, for our community and for our economy,” Caboni said. “It will continue elevating our national reputation and our growth toward becoming a Carnegie Research-II university.”

It’ll partner with faculty and students on research projects, he said. It’ll also pursue external funding opportunities, provide guidance on funding strategies, and assist in “developing and commercializing intellectual property opportunities on our campus,” Caboni said.

“As we’ve worked to develop the Innovation Campus for research and create a pathway for PhD programs at WKU, we are at a point to begin thinking about the Innovation Campus as essentially the next Transpark in Bowling Green,” Caboni said.

Mahurin Honors College

A report on the Mahurin Honors College, written by a task force comprising 20 faculty and staff and completed in May, “outlines a bold vision to reinvigorate the honors experience, to deepen its integration within our academic colleges, and to expand enrichment opportunities beyond the classroom,” Caboni said.

The upcoming honors college iteration aims to elevate offerings and expand access to a broader range of WKU students, Caboni said.

Lindy Davidson, the new director, will lead implementation of recommendations.

Faculty House

Caboni will appoint a committee this year to thoroughly review a previously conducted assessment of the Faculty House, evaluate options and make recommendations for a path forward, with options being demolition, remediation or relocation, Caboni said.

If remediation or relocation is viable, Caboni will task the committee with developing a plan to achieve either, he said. Caboni anticipates that when he shares such plans, there'll also be a plan to raise significant funding that would be needed.

Assessment thus far of Faculty House – conducted by a nationally recognized architectural and design firm, and a leading structural and engineering consulting firm – “revealed numerous issues, including extensive foundational and structural concerns and possible code violations that would require large-scale remediation,” Caboni said.

A separate assessment by an environmental firm identified asbestos. The facilities team installed necessary signage, Caboni said.

R2

The Council on Postsecondary Education is developing performance thresholds and submission guidelines for universities aiming to acquire the Research-II Carnegie classification.

Once those are in place, WKU will begin seeking approval for its first PhD offering, for data science.

Acquiring the R2 classification is one of WKU's top goals, Caboni has said.

Student housing

Every student seeking residence on the hill this fall has acquired a room, with the vast majority finding a living space that aligned with their key preferences, Caboni said.

Several national partners have indicated interest in collaborating in the future of student housing for WKU students, he added.

It was a follow-up to a Board of Regents meeting in June, where he had announced a new housing model following the permanent closure of Hilltopper Hall and temporary closures of Normal and Regents Hall.

The phased plan includes renovation of Regents and Normal halls and a completed first-year village that replaces Hugh Poland and Douglas Keen halls. It also includes the replacement of McCormack, Rodes-Harlin and Gilbert halls with a residential village for sophomores and upper class students.

WKU is coordinating on the model with the consultation firm Brailsford & Dunlavey and the WKU Student Life Foundation, a nonprofit that owns the residence halls serving WKU students.

Spirit of WKU Award

The annual Spirit of WKU Award went to Bryson Davis, the university's director of Student Financial Assistance.

He works with a team of about 24 on various aid programs, including scholarships, to veterans' benefits, institutional programs and other areas related to federal and state government to support students.

It's entailed navigating a host of constant changes concerning financial aid, such as with loan programs.

The crowded hall held an extended standing ovation for Davis.

"There is no one more deserving on our campus of this award than he," Caboni told the media. "I think you can tell by the reaction in the room: I'm not the only person who believes that our whole university understands the crucial role he plays in the lives of our students."

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni presents the Spirit of WKU award to Student Financial Assistance head Bryson Davis during the the convocation address to WKU faculty and staff inside Van Meter Hall on Monday, August. 11, one week before fall semester classes begin. (JACK DOBBS / The Daily News)