WKU president highlights growing presence in Hardin County

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Western Kentucky University continues to strengthen its ties to Hardin County with university leaders pointing to growing enrollment, expanded degree offerings and a longstanding partnership with Elizabethtown Community and Technical College as key parts of its regional presence.

WKU President Dr. Timothy Caboni highlighted the university's connection to the Heartland during Wednesday's Hardin County Chamber of Commerce August luncheon, noting the area is an important source of students and a growing part of the university's mission.

“Hardin County and Elizabethtown are really important to WKU,” Caboni said. “You are our fourth largest contributor of students to the campus, and obviously the work we do here in collaboration with ECTC is crucial to the success of the region.”

Caboni reports that there are 5,500 WKU alumni in the Heartland area, including Hardin, Meade and Fort Knox.

Additionally, Caboni said that WKU has experienced “tremendous success” in the past year.

“I’m proud that last year we achieved the highest graduation and retention rates in our history and awarded the largest number of degrees and credentials in WKU’s history,” Caboni said, adding that it couldn’t be done without the work of faculty and staff. “WKU students earned national distinction through scholarships last year. We recorded our sixth-consecutive record fundraising year with $44.5 million in private support and as you heard, we’re making significant investments in our physical plant.”

Last year, WKU opened the new home for the Gordon Ford College of Business: Amy and David Chandler Hall. The hill continues to be renovated to improve both academic and dormitory building quality.

Caboni explained a new transition to public-private residence halls that the university calls the “Elevate WKU” project.

“We are very excited about a transition to our public-private partnership on our residence halls, transforming residential life at the university,” Caboni said. “Douglas Keen and Hugh Poland Halls are now down. We are putting a thousand new private and semi-profit beds in something we’re calling the Southern Gateway. Those will double the number of living learning communities we have on campus and will open in the fall of ‘28.”

With work being done in Bowling Green, Caboni said he is also very proud of the work being done in Elizabethtown and Hardin County.

Previous ECTC President/CEO Thelma White and previous WKU President Gary Ransdell signed an agreement between the two colleges in 2011, which is meant to expand the partnership between the schools and allow students easier access to a four-year degree by admitting them to ECTC and WKU at the same time.

“WKU has 632 students from Hardin County enrolled at WKU this academic year, up 19 students from last year. This semester we celebrated a 12% overall face-to-face enrollment increase from just last year, and this is a five-year enrollment high for students starting on campus,” Caboni said. “To support the growing needs here in Elizabethtown, we continue to expand degree options and strengthen the way we serve the region.”

Caboni said that WKU is adding another program available at the ECTC campus: Human Resources Management through the Gordon Ford College of Business.

“We know employment in human resources related fields is projected to grow faster than the average for all occupations in the coming years. It’s obvious that business in Hardin County is booming, so we’re really proud to have that as a new offering,” Caboni said.

According to Caboni, WKU and Fort Knox served more than 1,100 students, including active duty service members, civilian employees and local veterans in the last year.

“We’re committed to making a WKU education accessible to those who serve by offering active duty military personnel a discounted tuition rate. When soldiers are deployed around the world, our staff continues to support them through academic advising and through phone and virtual appointments,” Caboni said. “We are the best location for veterans in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and we’re going to continue to be that place.”

Caboni also talked about how WKU works aggressively to maximize financial aid and scholarship support for every hilltopper.

“The average out-of-pocket cost for a full-time WKU Elizabethtown student is $1,435 a semester and 49% of our students pay absolutely nothing. We know a college degree is worth the investment and pays dividends, and we’re proud to remain an institution of access and of opportunity,” Caboni said.