Caboni talks housing, research status at convocation

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WKU President Timothy Caboni delivers his convocation address to WKU faculty and staff inside Van Meter Hall on Monday, Aug. 17. (JACK DOBBS / Daily News)

Retention and graduation rates, the future of student housing and continuing advances toward R2 research status were among the focuses of Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni's convocation address on Monday, delivered to university faculty and staff ahead of the fall semester's start next week.

Caboni told attendees that during the 2025-2026 year at WKU, 4,792 degrees and certificates were awarded to students, an increase of more than 100 from the year prior. Nearly 80% of Western's students returned as well, a figure Caboni said represents the highest retention rate in WKU history.

“These outcomes affirm that we are on the right track, and our students are better for them,” Caboni said.

Students are moving back into Normal and Regents Halls this fall for the first time since the dorms were closed for inspections and repairs after some issues were discovered in their structures. This follows the demolition of Hilltopper Hall, which was closed after numerous problems were found with the building’s construction.

After these shake-ups with housing, WKU signed an agreement with real estate company Gilbane that will see it take over management of Western’s dorms from the Student Life Foundation. Gilbane’s role is part of a wider plan to transform student housing at the university known as Elevate WKU.

“This model brings national expertise in financing, design, construction and operations, while we maintain what matters most — the student experience,” Caboni said.

Plans for the first phase of Elevate WKU were shown last year. This phase, called the Southern Gateway, will sit on the south end of campus near Pearce Ford Tower. Included is a 1,000-bed residence hall that will be on the site formerly occupied by Hugh Poland and Douglas Keen Halls, slated to open in the fall of 2028.

Speaking after the ceremony, Caboni said plans call for a new dorm situated near where Hilltopper Hall stood that will replace the beds currently housed in Gilbert Hall, McCormack Hall and Rodes Harlin Hall.

Work is also progressing on WKU’s effort to attain R2 research status by offering a doctorate program in data science. Caboni said the plan is to launch the program in the fall 2027 semester.

“Data science ranks among the fastest-growing disciplines worldwide, and this program positions WKU to prepare future researchers and industry leaders,” he said.

New academic programs have seen continued focus at WKU. Last week, the university’s Board of Regents voted to create two certificate programs, one in Ethics Applied and another in Digital Technology and Culture.

“I think both these certificates have the opportunity to be not only incredible for our students, but out in the public,” Provost Bud Fisher told regents.