

WKU president addresses postsecondary council

KATHERINE KNOTT The News-Enterprise Nov 5, 2017 Updated Nov 5, 2017

The Council of Postsecondary Education approved its budget recommendation Friday during its quarterly business meeting at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College.

The council asked for \$160 million in additional funding for the state's universities and community colleges. The additional funding will go toward performance funding and special initiatives.

"We fully understand the state's fiscal constraints," Council President Bob King said. "At the same time, we were asked to let policy makers know what we thought the universities and KCTCS needed to continue to effectively serve our students. We believe that these strategic investments will grow and improve the quality of our workforce, which, in turn, will grow the state's economy."

The council requested \$3.6 million for 2018 and \$5.9 million in 2019 for a workforce initiative through the Kentucky Community and Technical College System to address labor shortages in critical industry sectors.

Also during the meeting, presidents from Murray State, Western Kentucky and KCTCS reported on their progress toward achieving the goals outlined in CPE's 2016-21 strategic agenda.

WKU President Tim Caboni said he's been working hard to get up to speed during his first four months of the job.

During his presentation, he highlighted his 10-year aspirational targets for the university as far as retention and graduation rates and average credits earned. The targets were higher than those outlined in the council's strategic agenda.

Caboni said he'd rather shoot for a high target and miss by a little than shoot for a low target

and hit it.

In discussing the university's retention rate, Caboni said the school has real challenges in first-to-second-year retention.

In the 2015-16 school year, about 72.8 percent of first-year students returned the next year. Among low-income students, about 63.7 percent returned, a slight decrease from the year before.

Among underrepresented minority students, the retention rate also decreased from 59.1 percent to 58.3 percent. Caboni's 10-year target is 66 percent for this group of students and 72 percent for low-income students.

"I'm mindful of the gap," he said.

King said a concern with the retention and graduation rate appears to be the closure of the achievement gap.

"Over a five- to 10-year period, to reduce it by 1 or 2 percent is not enough," King said.

To help retain students, Caboni said WKU is raising money for opportunity scholarships to help offset the college's cost.

"One reason people are leaving is that we have an affordability issue," Caboni said.

During the meeting, King spoke several times of the need for all colleges to get better faster, and Caboni echoed that.

"We're pushing folks to be more aggressive, aspirational and actually meet needs of state," Caboni said to end his presentation.

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