

Climbing to
Greater Heights

The WKU Strategic Plan 2026 – 2031

Message from the Strategic Planning Committee Co-Chairs

As Hilltoppers, we learn together, support one another, and elevate the communities we serve. *Climbing to Greater Heights: 2026-2031* is the collective vision of our faculty, staff, and students as we look to the future higher education and serve to fulfill Western Kentucky University's commitment to our region and beyond. We extend our sincere appreciation to the dedicated members of the committee and subcommittees who shared their time, expertise, and thoughtful perspectives throughout this process. Their commitment to WKU made the planning process both efficient and meaningful, demonstrating what is possible when our community comes together around a shared vision for our Hill.

As we continue the climb, the work does not end with the publication of *Climbing to Greater Heights: 2026-2031*—the plan serves as a launchpad for an ambitious next chapter for Western Kentucky University. We encourage every member of the WKU community to engage with the plan, support its priorities, and look for opportunities to contribute to its success. Divisions and departments across the university should review the plan together; identifying key aspects of their operations that serve to engage the plan as we climb to 2031. The plan reflects a collective commitment to a bold future for all Hilltoppers ensuring the strategic use of our campus resources, energy, and action to turn our shared aspirations into meaningful progress for our students, our University, and the community we serve.

As co-chairs, it has been an honor to facilitate the discussion which served to undergird this strategic plan. The time our students, staff, faculty, and Board of Regents members dedicated to participating in this process was filled with reflections of our past successes as well as the realities necessary to grow. We are honored to have served the campus community as Co-Chairs of the WKU Strategic Planning Committee and to bring together representatives from across our University to build upon and extend the successes of the strategic plan implemented in 2017. We are grateful for the opportunity to help shape the next chapter of our beloved University.

Thank you for your commitment and dedication to WKU. We look forward to climbing together and eagerly await the next chapter for our beloved Hilltopper community as we prepare students of all backgrounds to be productive, engaged, and socially responsible citizen-leaders of a global society.



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From its origins as a Normal School 125 years ago, Western Kentucky University has been shaped by dedicated faculty and staff whose work in teaching, research, service, and stewardship has transformed the institution to a premier comprehensive public institution serving to shape students' lives, strengthen the surrounding communities, and create a distinctive, student-centered university experience. As the institution continues its climb, the future vitality of WKU depends on intentional investment in people, thoughtful stewardship of place, and a shared commitment to institutional excellence.

This strategic plan extension affirms WKU's responsibility to cultivate a campus environment where students, faculty and staff are supported, innovation is encouraged, discovery is elevated, and resources are stewarded wisely. It is intended to refine and deepen institutional priorities related to Climbing to Greater Heights, strengthening alignment among existing commitments, current realities, and emerging opportunities. Central to this vision is the distinctive WKU experience defined by meaningful faculty and staff engagement, a culture of recruitment, strong sense of community, student-centered learning, applied experiences, and a commitment to transforming lives, cultivating innovation, and elevating the communities we serve.

Building on the foundation established in the 2018 version of Climbing to Greater Heights, the Extension reflects lessons learned, new possibilities, and evolving aspirations. It is informed by a rapidly evolving higher education environment shaped by demographic change, heightened expectations for accountability, fiscal pressures, technological advancement, and increasing competition for both students and personnel.

Through engaging this strategic plan extension, Western Kentucky University will champion the value of higher education across the Commonwealth by clearly demonstrating its transformative impact on individuals, families, communities, workforce development, and economic prosperity. Through accessible and affordable educational opportunities, strong career outcomes, community partnerships, applied research, and civic engagement, WKU will communicate the measurable return on investment of a college degree while reinforcing higher education's essential role in strengthening innovation, quality of life, regional competitiveness, and informed citizenship throughout Kentucky and beyond.

OUR *Students*

WKU is committed to creating a student experience that focuses on new knowledge, is affordable, accessible, supportive, and transforms the lives of every Hilltopper. Through transparent and competitive affordability, expanded access to academic, financial, physical, digital, and psychological resources, and a strong culture of belonging, WKU will ensure that all students can thrive. By enrolling and supporting Hilltoppers, strengthening pathways to completion and career readiness, and fostering meaningful engagement both on campus and beyond, WKU will prepare students not only to graduate, but also to lead, contribute, and succeed in an increasingly connected and evolving world.

Affordability, Accessibility & Transparency

Ensure the WKU Experience remains affordable and accessible to every qualified student

- Expand accessibility to financial, academic, physical, digital, and psychological resources.
- Ensure that the true cost of a WKU education is transparent, predictable, and competitive within Kentucky and the region.
- Maintain a diverse offering of housing options and meal plans to accommodate different budgets
- Promote individualized financial planning services
- Expand awareness of the WKU Opportunity Fund by clearly communicating its accessibility to eligible students

A Diverse Body of Students

Enroll and support a broad and representative body of undergraduate, graduate, transfer, online, and nontraditional students who are prepared to succeed in an academic environment and who reflect the geographic, economic, and experiential breadth of the Commonwealth and beyond.

- Expand WKU's regional, state, national, and international reach while aligning enrollment strategy with institutional strengths as well as workforce demand and regional workforce shortage areas.
- Recognize neurodiversity and disability as dimensions of institutional diversity that strengthen the academic community, and position WKU's disability and accessibility infrastructure as a strategic asset.
- Support every student, especially underserved enrollment populations

- Help students fully understand the long-term value of earning a college degree, while also recognizing the affordability of Western Kentucky University

Student Completion, Success, and Support

Intentionally structure academic pathways and resource deployment to ensure students can progress efficiently to completion without avoidable delays or unnecessary credit accumulation. Success means that every student at WKU will graduate and secure a promising future while growing as a person throughout their time on the Hill.

- Ensure that students of all backgrounds can secure their academic, personal, and professional goals while doing so in a timely fashion.
- Align enrollment growth with institutional capacity and program quality, ensuring that student mix supports both mission fulfillment and long-term financial sustainability.
- Expand WKU's robust advising system, encompassing mentorship and career-integrated student support.
- Maintain a vibrant, flexible, and applied academic portfolio that prepares students for emerging professional demands with strategic deployment of institutional resources.
- Expand the current LLC model to increase student participation to second year Hilltoppers.

Campus Engagement, Belonging, and Community

Leverage WKU's 125 years of rich history as a vibrant platform of institutional pride. WKU is committed to fostering a vibrant, inclusive, campus-wide community where students, faculty, staff, local residents, and regional community members experience a genuine sense of belonging, take pride in the institution, and share a lasting commitment to its success. We invest not only in our students' education but also in cultivating a community that inspires connection, engagement, and purpose. We believe that academic achievement is strengthened by a culture where every member feels valued and invested, because at WKU, "The Spirit Makes the Master," "We Wear Red," and "We Show Up."

- Recognize that WKU Hilltoppers intentionally climb and connect as a part of a support network that feels like home; one that meets them where they are and helps them climb to greater heights.
- Create a new student onboarding experience that instills the Spirit of the Hill, founded in our campus Traditions, fostering a sense of belonging before the climb even begins.
- Provide enrichment through connections with peers, mentors, experiences, student-driven support systems, and opportunities for growth.
- Promote mechanisms for engaging students in institutional decision making, at all levels, ensuring that student perspectives inform continuous improvement with transparency in mind.
- Create more pathways for all students to engage with on-going campus activities such as campus speakers, performances, and athletics to build a more-connected campus community.
- Expand the Honors student experience to engage broader campus opportunities including leadership, interdisciplinary programming, and service initiatives that foster meaningful connections across the university.
- Leverage the Elevate WKU housing transformation to advance student belonging and community integration by intentionally designing new residential communities as platforms for engagement, not just accommodations.

Career Readiness for a Global Stage

Maintain a commitment to preparing new generations of graduates with the hard and soft skills necessary to thrive. At WKU, the world is your classroom. Time spent on the Hill prepares you for a life and career in the ever-changing world at home and abroad.

- Embed career-connected learning, internships, research, and employer partnerships throughout the academic experience, so students graduate prepared for evolving workforce demands and regional shortage areas.
- Ensure that graduates develop digital fluency, data literacy, and the ability to responsibly and effectively use emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence. WKU will prepare students from every background to elevate their life trajectory through career-connected learning, digital fluency, and AI-enabled disciplinary competence in a changing global economy.
- Expand equitable access to study away and study abroad opportunities, recognizing the transformational impact of global learning experiences on students' academic, professional, and personal development.
- Prepare students to live, learn, and work effectively across cultures, disciplines, and global contexts.

OUR *Hill*

The Hill is both a physical place and a symbolic representation of the people who bring Western Kentucky University's mission to life. This 2026 - 2031 extension of Our Hill is structured to emphasize care and excellence for employees, purposeful investment in infrastructure and financial sustainability, a culture of innovation and discovery aligned with WKU's research-grounded, applied-learning mission, and a shared responsibility for recruitment that reflects the distinctive quality of the WKU Experience at every touchpoint. Advancing Our Hill requires collective ownership across faculty, staff, administrators, and partners, recognizing that institutional quality is shaped not only by strategy and investment, but by everyday actions, decisions, and interactions across Our Hill.

Commitment to Care and Excellence for Our Employees

Establish and sustain a culture of wellness that actively supports employee physical and mental health, promotes excellence and accountability, and enables professional growth:

- Utilize a data-informed review process of higher education market conditions for employee salaries and benefits as a part of WKU's compensation framework to support competitiveness, internal equity, defined responsibilities, career longevity, and strategic performance.
- Continually strengthen systems for performance evaluation, recognition, and advancement by aligning annual review processes, tenure and promotion expectations, merit-based compensation adjustments, and workload decisions consistent with institutional priorities.
- Enhance employee wellness by providing services and resources that enhance overall quality of life, including an institutional emphasis on financial planning, physical health, professional development,

and mental wellbeing for all members of the WKU community while enhancing awareness of the total WKU compensation package.

- Develop and implement a structured transition and professional integration program that equips new faculty and staff for success by ensuring that new employees receive adequate training on university systems and processes while fostering early engagement, connection, and long-term success at WKU.
- Foster a collegial and welcoming workplace culture grounded in respect, shared purpose, and appreciation for WKU's history, traditions, and people.
- Improve systems and processes that promote collaboration across academic, administrative, and support units, enabling shared expertise and collective progress toward institutional goals.

Stewardship of Place, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Steward WKU's physical and virtual environments across all campus locations and university-owned and managed properties to foster community, promote academic excellence, facilitate meaningful engagement among all members of the WKU community, elevate institutional competitiveness in recruitment, advance sustainability, and ensure long-term institutional success:

- Align campus planning and long-term capital investments with institutional priorities and anticipated academic and student needs through the creation, preservation, and modernization of spaces that support teaching, learning, research, and meaningful engagement across the WKU community.

- Advance a comprehensive, phased redesign of campus housing that modernizes residential facilities, bolsters the on-campus experience, constructs facilities aligned with expectations of today's students, supports WKU's recruitment and retention, and furthers campus engagement goals impacting our alumni and the broader community.
- Continue to optimize academic program scheduling and space utilization to promote student success, balanced faculty workloads, and responsible use of institutional resources.
- Advance stewardship of place by adopting and expanding sustainable practices that promote efficient use of campus resources across facilities and operations.
- Invest in physical and virtual infrastructure that supports evolving modes of teaching, learning, research, and engagement while preserving the character and assets that define the Hill.
- Enhance WKU's digital infrastructure and virtual environments to support teaching, learning, collaboration, and student services, ensuring secure, reliable, accessible, and innovative platforms that enhance the WKU experience.
- Prioritize the continued evolution of campus common spaces as academic and social hubs that support research, discovery, scholarship, and student success, ensuring that spaces, services, and technologies remain aligned with the evolving modes of teaching and learning.
- Engage a public communication strategy prioritizing new physical structures and investments in campus facilities driving recruitment and community involvement on the Hill.

Continuing to Strengthen Our Financial Foundation

Ensure long-term financial sustainability through responsible stewardship, alignment with strategic priorities, data-informed decision-making, and continuous improvement:

- Continue implementing and fostering a shared awareness of how the performance-based RAMP model aligns resource allocation with demonstrated effectiveness, rewards success and outcomes, provides funding for strategic growth opportunities, and drives responsible stewardship of institutional resources.
- Identify and implement opportunities to improve operational efficiency by reducing manual processes, leveraging technology, streamlining workflows, and increasing coordinated planning across the institution.
- Strengthen financial decision-making through shared data, transparency, and regular assessment to promote institutional resilience and adaptability.
- Prioritize investments that directly strengthen student success, support employee performance, and ensure the long-term financial and operational stability of the institution in a changing higher education landscape.

Fostering a Culture of Innovation

Encourage innovation in teaching, learning, research, knowledge generation, and creative activity to meet the needs of a changing higher education landscape and expanding global and interdisciplinary contexts:

- Facilitate faculty and staff development through the promotion of effective and emerging pedagogical practices, providing evidence-based training in instructional design, and supporting the thoughtful adoption of new learning technologies that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

- Expand the adoption of high-impact practices such as experiential learning, collaborative instruction, immersive academic experiences, and process-based learning across disciplines.
- Strengthen collaborative structures, including partnerships with the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL), the Honors College, intracampus professional development opportunities, and other campus resources, to share effective pedagogical practices, instructional innovations, operational improvements, and emerging best practices ensuring the WKU experience serves as a launchpad for alumni success.
- Support responsible and intentional integration of artificial intelligence across teaching, learning, research, and operations while upholding academic integrity, ethical standards, and institutional values.

Engaged Research and Discovery

Strengthen WKU's identity as a student-centered, applied research institution and continue our advancement toward Carnegie designation as a Research-2 (Doctoral University: High Research Activity) institution:

- Expand, modernize, and improve access to research infrastructure to strengthen faculty scholarship, student discovery, and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Develop new doctoral programs in a phased and strategic manner, aligning them with institutional priorities, workforce demand, regional needs, and long-term financial sustainability.
- Integrate students more fully into research, scholarship, and creative activity, reinforcing discovery both at the undergraduate and graduate level as a hallmark of the WKU Experience.
- Strengthen and expand the reach of scholarly impact, external engagement, and continually elevate the perception of WKU as a high-quality, applied research institution.
- Align hiring, evaluation, and recognition practices to value scholarship and creative activity coupled with meaningful student mentorship and engagement.

Recruitment as a Shared Responsibility

Embed recruitment and enrollment initiatives as a shared institutional priority that reflects the WKU experience through distinctive high-quality programs, highly engaged faculty, and commitment to student success.

- Further cultivate a culture of hospitality and service that ensures prospective students and families experience WKU as welcoming, responsive, and engaged at every point of interaction across the institution.
- Ensure recruitment and yield considerations are integrated into academic program development, student services, facilities planning, communications, as well as all campus and community events.
- Equip faculty and staff with the tools, information, and support needed to serve as informed and effective ambassadors for the university, aligned with clearly defined roles and expectations.
- Promote practices and behaviors that help prospective students and families feel welcomed, supported, and confident in choosing WKU and maintaining WKU as their institution of choice across their academic journey.
- Establish and implement a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan using shared data, regular reporting, and coordinated planning to inform recruitment strategies and reinforce shared responsibility for enrollment outcomes.

- Present a consistent and compelling institutional narrative that affirms WKU's academic quality, student engagement, and the growth opportunities available to Hilltoppers both inside and outside the classroom.
- Engage a public communication strategy highlighting the distinct advantages and outcomes of beginning the WKU Experience as a freshman. Our Community and Beyond

OUR *Community*

WKU is committed to serving as a driving force for regional growth, opportunity, and quality of life by strengthening partnerships that connect education, workforce development, research, innovation, and community engagement. Through meaningful collaboration with alumni and community stakeholders, WKU will expand lifelong learning opportunities, support economic competitiveness, and advance applied research and talent development that directly benefit the region, the Commonwealth and beyond. WKU will continue to strengthen communities by fostering unified engagement, investing in relationships, and elevating its role as a cultural, athletic, and civic cornerstone by creating a lasting impact demonstrating the enduring value of higher education to society.

A Community Catalyst

Advance WKU as a collaborative growth engine of economic development that aligns partnership, research, talent development, and innovation to strengthen the communities and industries we serve.

- Engage the communities we serve as a trusted, first-choice partner in addressing social, economic, and workforce challenges, and establish measurable indicators of partnership impact and satisfaction.
- Partner with business, industry, educational institutions, and civic organizations to create mutually beneficial cultural, environmental, scientific, and economic opportunities.
- Strengthen employer relationships and talent pipeline alignment to ensure WKU graduates are career ready, equipped with critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills.
- Refine and position the Innovation Campus as a hub that advances community partnership, student opportunity, and faculty and staff innovation through applied research and entrepreneurial collaboration.
- Recruit and support faculty whose scholarship and applied research partnerships advance WKU's research ambitions and contribute directly to regional economic development.
- Strengthen and align WKU's research enterprise to expand sponsored and contractual external funding, applied scholarship, and measurable community and industry impact.

Workforce & Lifelong Learning

Expand workforce-aligned degree pathways and lifelong learning opportunities that strengthen talent development and economic competitiveness.

- Create clear and transparent alignment of academic programs connecting secondary and post-secondary state recognized career pathway programs.
- Create streamlined pathways to complete degrees and credentials.
- Establish WKU regional campuses as distinctive, hyper-local hubs that address community-specific workforce and educational needs.
- Expand graduate and doctoral programs to meet workforce demands and economic priorities.

- Develop flexible, accessible program formats that support reskilling and upskilling.
- Prepare students for meaningful careers and lifelong learning through experiential education, internships, undergraduate research, and partnerships with employers, alumni, and community organizations.
- Leverage an integrated model of Honors programming serving to foster the development of adaptable leaders equipped with the critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills needed to contribute to Kentucky and beyond.

Our Shared Community

Elevate WKU's contribution to regional quality of life and community identity by strengthening its role as a cultural, civic, athletic, and community anchor across our service area.

- Position WKU's athletic programs as a catalyst for community pride, regional visibility, and institutional engagement, strengthening the University's role as a premier gathering place for competitive excellence.
- Expand access to community-facing academic, artistic, cultural, and lifelong learning opportunities that educate, inspire, and engage residents of all ages.
- Leverage WKU's physical resources as accessible community assets and strategic regional event spaces that enhance quality of life and contribute to measurable economic impact.
- Raise WKU's visibility and engagement as an institutional partner across our entire service region, and in key metropolitan areas furthering the value of higher education.
- Leverage applied learning clinics and community-based programs to contribute to regional health and wellness while equipping WKU students with hands-on professional experience.

Investing in Relationships

Strengthen constituent engagement and philanthropic support to advance WKU's mission, expand opportunity, and ensure long-term institutional sustainability.

- Develop a unified engagement strategy that activates alumni, parents, donors, and business leaders through meaningful experiences and measurable pathways supporting recruitment, student success, career development, lifelong connection, advocacy, and philanthropy.
- Align athletics, foundation, and university fundraising strategies to ensure coordinated outreach, shared accountability, and maximized institutional impact.
- Expand and diversify the corporate and philanthropic prospect base to build sustainable, cross-sector investment.
- Expand university representation and overall presence at community events.

Unified Engagement & Voice

Create a coordinated and accessible approach for external stakeholders to engage with WKU by aligning systems, leadership, and institutional messaging across all community touchpoints.

- Establish a model for external engagement to ensure clear entry points and shared visibility across the institution.
- Craft consistent messaging of WKU's research, innovation, workforce, and economic impact in clear, community-centered language.
- Demonstrate the importance of higher education by clearly communicating its societal value and WKU's measurable impact on students, families, communities, and the economy.

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