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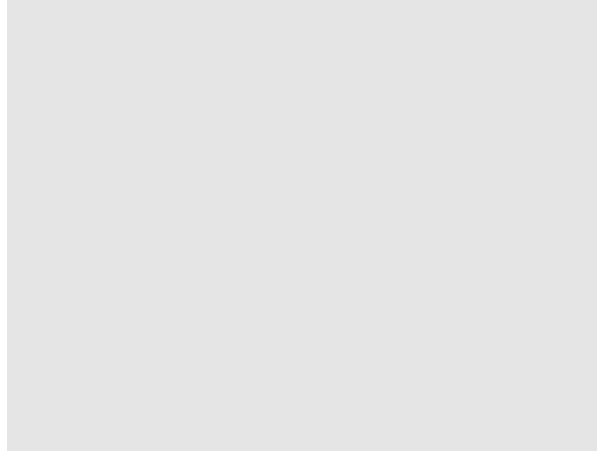
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CPE president makes WKU stop on listening tour

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Apr 19, 2019



Aaron Thompson

Despite its lofty high school graduation rate, Kentucky isn't sending enough of its graduates to college, with only about 53 percent pursuing some sort of higher education.

"That's such a low rate. We've got to get it up," Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education President Aaron Thompson told the Daily News on Thursday.

Thompson, who took the helm of the state's coordinating agency for higher education in October, is embarking on a statewide listening tour to hear perspectives about the biggest issues facing higher education in Kentucky.

His latest stop brought him to Bowling Green to meet with local high school students, faculty and staff at Western Kentucky University and WKU President Timothy Caboni, according a news release.

In an interview with the Daily News, Thompson shared what he's heard from students, employers and other stakeholders about their perspectives on higher education in the state, with college affordability and job skills high on the list.

Overall, he described a larger goal to increase interest and restore faith in higher education as a vehicle for success in life.

"I think there's been a feeling that higher education isn't as valuable as it once was," Thompson said.

He added that many in the public think universities teach students what to think and not how to think, and that their degree programs aren't teaching students to succeed on the job.

Thompson said access to education offers many social benefits, such as greater civic engagement, lower unemployment and reliance on social services and greater tax revenue for the state.

However, Thompson said he hears from students that "many are perceiving that they may not be able to afford to go to college," that they don't know enough about how to pay for their higher education or even what education options are available to them.

Part of the solution will come from improving messaging about how much money potential college students can actually expect to pay when scholarships and discounts are factored into the cost of attendance.

Next year, when lawmakers consider a two-year state budget, Thompson plans to ask for more higher education funding. His request will include more money for the state's higher education performance funding system, which rewards universities for achieving certain outcomes. Thompson also wants them to grant more one-time funding so universities can target growth initiatives, such as efforts to recruit more out-of-state students, and more funding for campus maintenance.

The bottom line is that more can be done to help students afford college, Thompson said.

"A part of this affordability issue is around perception, but a part of it is around reality," he said. "We have many students that can't truly afford to go to college for a variety of reasons."

Thompson has also heard from employers, who've told him that college graduates are entering the workforce without the basic skills they need to succeed on the job.

Employers are telling him that students need better problem-solving, critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, he said.

For Thompson, tackling that issue means involving employers and industries in designing postsecondary degree programs so they can get the skilled employees they need. He also wants to develop pipelines between postsecondary institutions and industry partners so that employers can quickly snap up graduates.

All of this is in service of the goal of increasing higher education attainment for Kentucky's high school graduates, Thompson said, touting a goal of increasing that percentage to 60 percent by 2030.

While more students are pursuing one-year credentials and two-year technical degrees, Thompson said there's more ground to cover when it comes to traditional four-year college, calling them a "huge part of our long-term success in this state."

Thompson also responded to a recent announcement that WKU is preparing to suspend 101 academic program as part of a comprehensive review of its 380 total academic programs. Many of the program cuts fall within the Potter College of Arts and Letters.

Asked if the humanities are losing their place in the higher education experience, Thompson said he sees the humanities, arts and social sciences as "powerful competencies" that are "crucial" for producing more sophisticated professionals.

An employer hiring an engineer, for example, will likely want them to have a broader education than just engineering, he said.

"I promise you will want that engineer to be more wide-ranging in the way he or she thinks," he said.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

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