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After hurdles, WKU President says campus will 'turn a corner' in new year

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Director of Strategic Enrollment Management and Retention Support Sharon Hunter speaks to students during a parent and family member social on Monday, August 19, 2019, at Downing Student Union. (Austin

Speaking to faculty and staff Monday at Van Meter Hall, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni aimed to turn the page on two tumultuous years when multiple rounds of budget and staffing cuts loomed large.

“The past two years have been tough. Let me assure you, I understand how trying it has been. It hasn’t been easy. I get it,” Caboni said, reading from prepared remarks during his annual faculty and staff convocation address.

In June, with the approval of a \$387 million campus budget, the university tightened its belt once again and asked its academic colleges and support units to cut \$8,644,000 in spending over the course of the upcoming fiscal year, which began for WKU in July. At the time, Caboni described the cuts as targets for individual colleges and units to find ways to meet over the next 12 months.

And in June 2018, a combination of declining enrollment, state spending cuts and fixed cost increases prompted WKU to cut \$27 million in spending and eliminate almost 150 positions, 72 of which were filled.

In his remarks Monday, Caboni sought to place those challenges firmly in the past.

“Now, as we start the 2019-20 academic year, we turn a corner,” he said, adding the year ahead will focus on implementing the priorities laid out in WKU’s 10-year strategic plan, called Climbing to Greater Heights.

“For those here this morning expecting new announcements of large-scale changes, I’m fearful you may be disappointed because this year is about execution. It’s about doing all of the small things that cumulatively move an organization, practicing relentless incrementalism,” Caboni said.

Retention

Part of those efforts include initiatives to retain more first-time students, Caboni said. The university has adjusted its financial aid for students in need, streamlined academic advising and created the WKU Summer Scholars program that allows struggling high school students to take “a trial run at college,” he said.

Of the 142 students welcomed to campus July 15 through the program, 116 met requirements to continue at WKU this fall, Caboni said.

Those efforts are paying off, Caboni said. Last fall, the university admitted its most academically prepared freshman class ever – with an average GPA of 3.39 and an average ACT score of 23.2, he said. That class was retained between the first and second semester at a 4 percent higher rate compared to 2017, he said.

“We made even larger gains among low-income students, up 5 percent; first generation students, up 5.2 percent; and underrepresented minority students, up 7.8 percent,” Caboni said.

This past spring, WKU celebrated the largest number of graduates seen in its history, he said, drawing spontaneous applause from the audience.

“Today, I have terrific news to share with you on the retention front. If our preliminary numbers hold, we will have retained our first-year students at the highest rate since 2009,” Caboni said. “We’re one-tenth of a percent away from the highest in our history, and even though the cohort began with fewer students last fall, we will have almost the same number of sophomores this year as we did last.”

Going forward, WKU is setting a goal to retain 80 percent of its first-year class, a lofty goal that Caboni said requires much more work to pull off.

Recruitment

As WKU makes moves to snap up more students, it does so facing stiff competition.

That's because Kentucky's overall pool of high school graduates to recruit from is gradually shrinking and fewer of those graduates are choosing to pursue postsecondary education. Caboni noted that the college-going rate in Kentucky is now 17 percentage points below the national average and trending lower.

“Two years ago, 2,500 students applied to WKU and went nowhere to college. Last year that number increased to 3,000 and this year will rise to over 3,500,” he said.

“That's 3,500 young people who are making a decision not to pursue any education past high school. That is not a recipe for economic success for our region. We must demonstrate for our families and their students the lifelong value of a college degree and the economic benefit of attending and graduating from college,” he said.

Facing competition from community colleges, Caboni said he hoped to give faculty and staff “the right information in order to help” students succeed in the long run.

“First, if a student wants to pursue a four-year degree, their absolute best chance of success is to begin at a four-year institution,” he said. “Nationally, only 13 percent of students who start at a community college earn a bachelor's degree in six years. In Kentucky, that completion rate is only 8 percent ... We need to educate our broader community that the recipe for successfully attaining a bachelor's degree is to begin with us.”

The university is also increasing tapping out-of-state markets, such as Nashville and middle Tennessee.

Going forward

In May, WKU's Board of Regents approved a plan to suspend 101 of the university's academic programs, marking the end of a nine-month review to examine the relevance of the university's 380 total programs.

On Monday, Caboni addressed the fate of 57 programs targeted for gradual “transformation” and another 15 programs identified for growth that will receive immediate investment.

Of the programs that will be reinvented, Caboni said: “We are asking the hard questions, ‘What do our students and our families want? What does the marketplace need? And how do we completely re-conceptualize these in a way that makes them vibrant, energized and more appealing to our students and more exciting for our faculty to teach?’ ”

Progress is also continuing on WKU’s new “First Year Village,” which is meant to form the basis of a stronger freshmen-year experience.

The project includes replacing and building two new residence halls at the bottom of WKU’s hill that enclose large green space. It’s slated to be open in the fall of 2021, and will provide living space for students who share academic interests, take some classes together and receive faculty and peer mentoring, Caboni said.

Several faculty and staff members offered positive reactions to Caboni’s remarks.

“It was nice to hear some of the statistics about the improvements that we’ve made in recruitment and retention,” said Lauren McClain, an associate professor of sociology.

Jonathan Oglesby, a laboratory safety officer in the Department of Environment, Health and Safety, said he appreciated Caboni’s tips for recruitment and his hopeful vision for the university.

“Maybe we’re not running just yet, but we’re walking in the right direction,” he said.

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