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EDUCATION

WKU President discusses Owensboro campus highlights, says university is focused on issue of student debt

By Josh Kelly SEPTEMBER 15, 2022 | 12:08 AM **UPDATED SEPTEMBER 15, 2022 | 12:18 AM**



Timoty Caboni, President of Western Kentucky University | Photo by Josh Kelly

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Timoty Caboni, President of Western Kentucky University, made a stop at the Owensboro Rotary Club on Wednesday, noting the development that Owensboro’s satellite campus is making.

Caboni said the WKU-O location has 421 enrolled students — marking higher enrollment than any of the last 5 years. The campus serves a variety of demographics including online, in-person, first-time students, and those returning to school.

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“One of our top commitments remains elevated communities in which we live, and our own for our campus, our programs, our students, our faculty, our staff, and our partners are crucial to our university, the whole university,” Caboni said.

He said they try to build the programs at WKU-O to the needs of the community, and in partnership with Owensboro Community & Technical College. The partnership allows the students to transfer from OCTC and obtain a degree in 2-4 years.

Some of the programs offered at the location address those needs: social work, criminology, psychology, engineering, technology management and organizational leadership. Caboni noted that one of the most crucial programs to Owensboro includes the elementary education program.

It is geared to teaching students the ins and outs of childhood education, and also aims to retain students in the area after graduation to help address the teacher shortage in many of the local systems.

“Each [program is] designed to provide a pipeline for the local workforce that is so desperately needed. And we’re working

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aggressively. ... I'm proud that the elementary education is the largest program right here in Owensboro," he said.

Speaking about the Bowling Green campus, Caboni said the location grew its scholarship dollars pool from 85% to 93% — which allows 93% of WKU students from Owensboro to receive scholarship support in some way.

This accounted for 30% of students from Daviess County at WKU having their tuition fully covered last year.

With the additional financial assistance initiatives, the school also was able to improve its overall first-year retention rate to 90% — with 91% of Owensboroans returning for their second year.

Caboni said he is also interested in ensuring that students are able to complete their studies at WKU without accumulating large amounts of debt, and that the solution begins with the institutions.

"For higher education, the system does not work; this is the university president saying this. We've got to make sure that we're making sure young people understand what debt is and what that means for their lives," Caboni said.

At WKU, he said the average debt is \$25,000 in student loans. And the university has been striving for ways to help students who may be less likely to succeed to approach college with a better financial understanding.

They do that through institutional grants for students who may be in tough situations, helping ensure they are able to earn their degree so they will be able to pay off their debts in the long run.

Essentially, he believes that the institutions need not be "predatory" on students who don't know the cost of college. To him, student loan debt has passed being just a political issue and is becoming an economic issue for the state.

"We only have about 40% of our young people [in Kentucky] go

to college because of this conversation,” Caboni said. “... I don’t blame them for not wanting to take on debt. And we have a state 30 miles to the south of me: Tennessee. They have around 60-65% students going to college after high school.”

He hopes that the state can get better at ensuring students go to college, because in his eyes if the state can’t figure out how to do so, there will be “a generation of folks left behind.”

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