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# Hill's-eye view: Caboni sees continuing enrollment success, more capital projects

MICHAEL J. COLLINS michael.collins@bgdailynews.com

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Construction work continues at the site of the new Gordon Ford College Thursday.

PHOTOS BY Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Western Kentucky University's President Timothy Caboni nears his seventh year in the role. For him, the new year was a chance to look back on what's been done and what's to come.

"We pause and reflect and re-gather ourselves, and then sprint to commencement again in May, so we're looking forward to an exciting year," Caboni said. "For us, I think its themes are similar, which is a good thing."

## Retention & Recruitment

WKU last semester saw its first increase in overall degree-seeking enrollment in 13 years.

"Our school mission is to educate students to four-year degrees and one- or two-year graduate degrees," Caboni said. "We have been declining in that category for years, and so this is a shift."

That shift, he said, has been driven by "refocusing" on full-time, degree-seeking students who complete their degree in four years, rather than padding numbers with dual-credit and single-course students, for example.

He added that COVID-19 set students up with a different set of expectations than before. What many are seeking now is an in-person "college experience," which Caboni says WKU can fulfill.

Caboni said full-time four-year students benefit the university by providing stability both in student enrollment and in the university's budget. To attract them,

he said, the university has continued to tap into potential student pipelines across the country.

“For us, the biggest growing market we have is Nashville, and then the next two markets are actually in Illinois, outside of Chicago and outside of St. Louis,” Caboni said.

Caboni said the university is building a reputation across these markets through in-person and direct communication with families.

“We also have had amazing partners across campus, especially deans and the colleges and their faculty staff who are completely committed to recruiting and telling families what their young people will experience at WKU,” Caboni said. “That level of engagement provides a compelling message of how our institution cares for and will support students and their successes.”

The university may also be benefitting from exceptional enrollment growth across Kentucky. The Council for Postsecondary Education announced Thursday that Kentucky had the highest overall enrollment gains in the U.S. from fall 2022 to fall 2023 – 5.6%, beating Maryland at 4.6%.

Last school year revealed another major success for WKU – 85.1% of degree-seeking undergraduate students from the fall returned in the spring, the highest retention rate recorded since the university began tracking the figure in 2010.

Caboni said WKU is still compiling its 2023-24 spring retention but added "we look like we're going to break that record again."

Caboni said improving access to mental health services among students has been an important piece of that retention.

WKU's Living Learning Communities have also proven effective and popular, Caboni said. These programs place students in pod-style residences shared by others within their major or community. Caboni said roughly a third of eligible students participate in LLCs, but he wants to see roughly half in the next several years. The program has been so popular that he'd like to see more residence halls built with them in mind, similar to the First Year Village, which opened in 2021.

"Last year in the spring, we had probably 800 students who wanted to be in an LLC that we couldn't accommodate yet," Caboni said. "It's been so wildly popular, so we've done work to increase those slots again this year."

## Building Projects

Work on the new Gordon Ford College of Business building continues with much excitement around campus, Caboni said. He said the topping out ceremony will likely be held next summer.

However, on-campus construction will be far from finished.

Work is underway on the press box above the Harbaugh Club at Houchens Industries-L.T. Smith Stadium. Caboni hopes to see construction completed by fall 2025 in time for the first game of the season.

WKU's Academic Complex is also slated for demolition and replacement, though progress will depend on what the university can get from state legislators, Caboni said.

"Replacing (the Academic Complex) remains our number one capital ask and we'll work with the legislature to see if there's an appetite for another building project, but you don't get those two years in a row usually," Caboni said.

The iconic Cherry Hall will receive a major facelift within the next few years, though again progress depends on legislative funding. Caboni said work likely won't begin until after completion of the business college.

"We could begin a little bit of planning and design before that, but we have to shore up the funds there," Caboni said.

The ultimate goal of the project is to modernize the interior of the building while remaining cognizant of its historical roots. Caboni said they've already completed a study of Cherry Hall to identify potential challenges moving forward.

“The mechanicals in the building are really challenged, so we could probably sink \$30 million into the facility and wouldn't see a thing cosmetically, and that's not the goal,” Caboni said.

The university will need to explore additional means for funding to complete the project, Caboni said, and he expects to seek preservation funds through the state.

## Funding & Legislative Priorities

Caboni will ask legislators for increased base and performance funding for both budget years largely due to the pressures felt by rising inflation.

“We've had a significant investment, for which I am appreciative, into performance funding during the time that I've been here, and that's great,” Caboni said. “But the challenge with performance funding is that it's not recurring dollars, it's one-time dollars.

“Because of that, it makes it difficult to respond to inflationary pressures or makes it difficult to do raises that come out of an appropriation.”

He added that increasing performance funding will help further WKU's goal of increasing the number of Kentuckians with a degree or certification.

WKU will also seek additional asset preservation dollars and capital improvement funding for the Academic Complex project.

“The return on those dollars to the economy is a multiplier effect,” Caboni said. “For every \$1 they invest, the return to the economy is \$2 to \$3, and so it's a good investment for the state.”

He said WKU will present additional requests mid-way through the session but declined to elaborate on what they would be.

A legislative committee recently approved WKU to use \$27,500 of its budget to contract lobbying firm Commonwealth Alliances to assist with their efforts.

“It's not an appropriation, it's just giving us permission to use dollars that we have available within our budget currently to do that congressional contractual work,” Caboni said.

While the university is asking for more from legislators, alumni and donors have given more than was asked to WKU's Opportunity Fund.

The fund began in 2018 to break down barriers for students, whether that be paying scholarship gaps, providing emergency relief or helping fund study abroad trips.

WKU initially set a goal to reach \$50 million in the fund. Last fall, the fund passed \$90 million – “remarkable,” Caboni said.

“We want to make sure every person who wants to have the experience can do that, no matter of their family's economic condition,” Caboni said. “We hit that \$50 million goal in about two and a half years, so we just doubled it to \$100 million.”

To date, the fund has raised \$95.9 million and offers 242 endowed scholarships.

## The Innovation Campus

Caboni spoke at WKU’s last convocation ceremony about the need to double the university’s research activity within the next five to seven years. The Innovation Campus has been at the heart of that initiative.

“The future of the Innovation Campus includes additional investment in spaces for companies and a deepening of partnerships with companies we already have there,” Caboni said. “We’ll have some news sometime in the spring semester about a large tenant and some collaborative work we're doing with them, that's going to be exciting to announce.”

Caboni said that the mystery tenant will be automotive-related and “create a separate opportunity for the university more proximate to campus.”

Several companies have found their way to the campus in the last year, including augmented reality software developer MyXR Inc., AI development firm BeingAI and telehealth company Lunae LLC.



Caboni said companies are expected to provide guidance and resources to students when on campus, a model that has seen considerable success.

“The kind of work that we do as an institution is mostly not designed to be placed in some obscure Research Journal, it really has practical implications,” Caboni said.

The campus will continue to provide shared spaces for students seeking a business of their own at a discount, which Caboni said both creates jobs locally and inspires young entrepreneurs to stay in the city.

Caboni said many of the industries found at the campus, especially those centered around creative development and software design, bring opportunities to the city that otherwise would not be present.

“We're going to have 100,000 new people come into the area over the next decade,” Caboni said. “We want to make sure we have a good mix of jobs available for them.”

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**Michael Collins**

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