

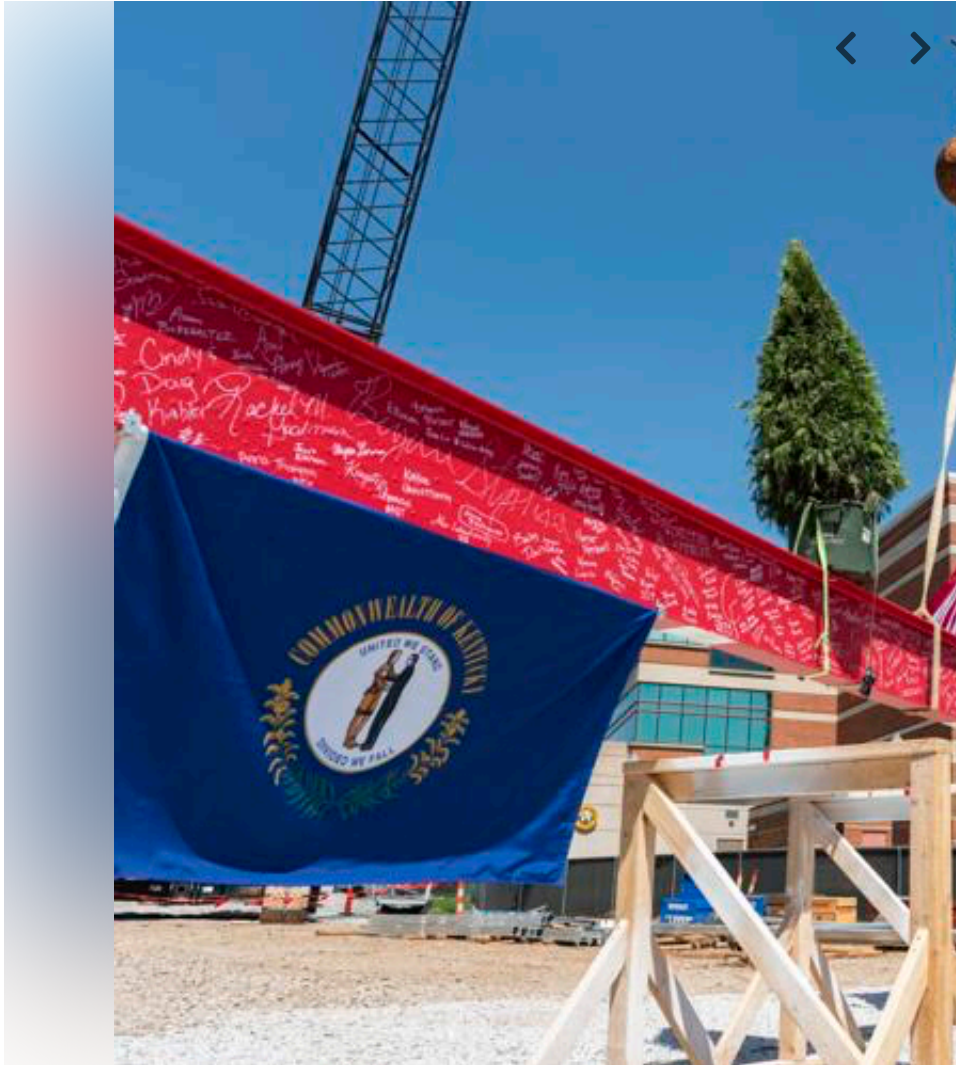
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WKU 'tops off' new business college with final steel beam

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Workers raise the final steel beam installed Thursday in the new Gordon University. The beam carried an evergreen tree for good luck along with officials and members of the public.

PHOTOS BY JACK DOBBS / jack.dobbs@bgdailynews.com

A big red beam covered with names will forever sit tucked away in the skeleton of Western Kentucky University's new Gordon Ford College of Business building.

The campus community came together Thursday for a "topping-off ceremony" to celebrate the installment of the final steel beam of the work-in-progress structure.

Attendees were invited to sign their names before the beam was hoisted high and bolted in place.

WKU President Timothy Caboni told the Daily News the ceremony, as well as the inevitable completion around late 2025, marks a milestone for the community, students and the region.

"It's a testimony to our commitment to growing the regional economy of Warren County and all of southcentral Kentucky," Caboni said. "One of the ways we're going to do that is through a remarkable business education and a great new facility."

Generations of Western Kentucky University students walked Grise Hall each day in pursuit of marketing, accounting, finance degrees and more. Now, the aging structure is facing the end of its lifespan.

"While Grise Hall has served as the cornerstone of our business education program since 1967, the 2021-31 Campus Master Plan revealed that this facility, approaching 60 years of age, had surpassed its operational lifespan," Caboni told attendees. "That's the nice way to say it needs to go."

Caboni said the project, which broke ground last year, was made possible by \$74.4 million in state funding approved in the 2022-24 General Assembly budget. He said showing legislators “how higher education benefits the larger economy and the broader community” was crucial to earning that allocation.

“I think we’ve turned a corner with our legislature,” Caboni said. “They understand for us to continue the growth that we’ve had in terms of the state budget and revenue, we need to continue to transform our workforce, which means more people, more degrees, working better jobs.”

Several lawmakers attended to see the fruit of that investment, including Sens. Mike Wilson, R-Bowling Green, and Max Wise, R-Campbellsville, as well as State Reps. Michael Meredith, R-Oakland, Shawn McPherson, R-Scottsville, and Kevin Jackson, R-Bowling Green.



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The physical work has been trusted to Messer Construction. Senior Project Executive Brian Howard said they have overseen “1,479 cubic yards of concrete poured, 60 tons of steel placed and a crane maneuvering material to the 30 craft professionals onsite” without any accidents or injuries.

The final product will span 113,000 square feet and include a three-story atrium, 21 classrooms and a coffee shop.

Students and faculty will have access to a virtual reality simulation space, a trading lab with access to financial data software, a business hub, flexible classrooms and spaces tailored to modern instruction and a “one-stop-shop Student Success Center.”

“The one single facility that excites me the most is our Student Success Center,” said Evelyn Thrasher, interim dean of the business college. “It will house all of our advising services, our tutoring center, our Center for Financial Success, our professional clothes closet. Every

student can walk into the building, walk immediately into that space and start to get answers and help and the resources to help them for all four years.”

Thrasher, who was selected as interim dean in July 2023, will assume the position permanently in July. She said entering the position on the eve of the new building is “the honor of a lifetime.”

“I joined the faculty here in 2008, and at that time, there was talk of a new building,” Thrasher said. “It’s been a very long time coming and certainly worth the wait. It’s an incredible facility and it’s going to do such incredible things for the college, and to be able to be the dean that helps finish the project and help open the new building is such an honor.”

She added “you can feel the excitement building” among educators, students and administrators as the building nears completion.

“Being able to see it coming to life is really creating so much excitement,” she said. “Knowing that in one year we’ll be able to take ownership of it and start our new chapter there, we are really, really looking forward to that.”

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