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Caboni lauds faculty, staff's efforts in campus address

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com
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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni speaks at the faculty & staff convocation in Van Meter Hall on August 16, 2021. Caboni honored Margaret Munday, WKU's first Black graduate who recently had Northeast Hall renamed in her honor, and awarded a new targeted opportunity fund for hiring a more diverse faculty and awarded Head Volleyball Coach Travis Hudson the Coach of the Year award. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

Seeking to strike an optimistic chord Monday, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni championed faculty and staff accomplishments against the chaos of the coronavirus pandemic when he delivered his annual Convocation address.

"The past year challenged us – not just in how we worked – but also in how we lived," Caboni said, addressing a masked-up audience in Van Meter Hall's auditorium.

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With the venue about half-full, others chose to attend virtually, with the event livestreamed via Zoom.



“Our faculty, our staff and our students rose in extraordinary ways – caring, guiding, supporting and challenging one another,” Caboni said. “Thank you for demonstrating endless acts of selflessness and kindness; thank you for leading; and thank you for doing all that you did to keep our WKU community safe.”

Last fall, the university’s faculty toiled to hybridize or convert their classes to online formats, all in service of reducing density on campus. This fall, it seems that work paid off, Caboni said.

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“Because of your work we retained last year’s freshman class at a rate of over 74% as we continue our press toward our goal of an 80% retention rate,” Caboni said.

“We delivered our classes. We conducted research. We provided the WKU experience and we continued to meet our mission as a student-centered, applied-research university,” he said.

Caboni also touted some of his own accomplishments – including raising more than \$50 million to support need-based student financial aid through WKU’s Opportunity Fund.

“Three years ago at my investiture, I announced the creation of the WKU Opportunity Fund, a \$50 million fundraising effort to ensure every student at WKU could have a full college experience,” Caboni said, crediting his wife, Kacy, for leading on the campaign. “I am pleased to announce that as of Aug. 6 we have raised \$51,864,000 – already surpassing our initial goal – and we created 150 new endowed scholarships.”

Caboni also celebrated the opening of WKU’s First-Year Village, which features two new high-end residence halls, and the debut of the WKU Commons. Located in the extensively renovated Helm Library, the new study-social venue will open later this fall, Caboni said.

Still, many challenges lie ahead for the university. Much will hinge on just how many students show up next week and stick around beyond the first few weeks of the semester.

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The coronavirus pandemic hasn’t helped the university’s recruitment efforts, with admissions staff unable to visit schools.

“As you might imagine, recruiting when we could not visit high schools in person posed a serious challenge to our admissions staff,” Caboni said. “They responded with creativity and engaged the incoming class of 2025 through any means available. And while we are still actively enrolling and recruiting students, this year’s entering class will again be the most well-prepared freshman class in WKU history, continuing our success in shaping and enhancing the academic qualifications of our incoming students.”

Colleges across the country saw their enrollment drop last school year, with undergraduate enrollment declining by 4.5% last spring compared to one year earlier. Undergraduate enrollment fell by 4.4% last fall, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center said.

WKU also has work to do to make its pay more competitive compared to its peer institutions. Many senior faculty and staff have reported salary “compression” issues, which essentially means their wages haven’t kept up with even what less experienced employees are making.

“Let me be clear: We will have a 2% raise pool this year. Because of your performance, because of the investment from the state legislature and because of a modest tuition increase, we are able to provide this pool,” Caboni said.

“We will continue to move the needle on compensation compared to our peers. To do that, we need a 2% pool, not just this year, but regularly and consistently. That will require continued partnership with the state and continued good work across the university. But we are committed to continuing this progress,” Caboni said.

Relaying the university’s efforts to improve diversity, equity and inclusion on campus, Caboni highlighted a special work group that’s continuing to campaign to “reduce biases and ensure all faculty, staff and students are treated with dignity, respect and equity.”

To that end, Caboni also honored the legacy of Margaret Munday, WKU’s first Black student and graduate, who the university recently commemorated by renaming Northeast Hall in her honor.

“Ms. Munday was a pioneer and her enrollment helped usher in an era of social and educational change that paved the way for others to follow. This will be the first building on our campus named for an African American. And, as I said at the board of regents meeting, it’s an honor that is well deserved – and for our institution – well past time.”

Before closing out his address, Caboni also seemed to respond to critics of higher education.

“Our world needs higher education and what we do now more than ever before,” he said. “We must produce citizens with the ability to make sense of complex information and critically examine the source of that information – we have access to more data than ever before in human history – but we need an educated citizenry with the ability to separate truth from manipulation; fact from biases; real from fake. To remain dispassionate and objective. And that’s exactly what we do – every day. We don’t teach what to think – we teach how to think. And doesn’t our society need more of that?”

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