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WKU making strides with LGBTQ inclusion

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Through a campuswide effort, Western Kentucky University has gone up on the national Campus Pride Index with a new official rating of 4.5 stars out of 5, the university announced Wednesday.

Molly Kerby, an assistant provost at WKU and one of its two chief diversity officers, characterized the recognition as a collective achievement. Speaking to the Daily News, Kerby said the progress the university has made in recent years is due to the momentum built up by people working across campus to improve their own little corner of the university.

“WKU has worked diligently over the past two years to increase that rating and create a more welcoming environment for all LGBTQ+ members of our campus community,” Kerby said in a news release, adding the university’s strategic plan sets a goal of earning a 5-star rating by 2027-28. “We are way ahead of schedule.”

The Campus Pride Index is a free, online benchmarking tool for campuses interested in recruiting more LGBTQ+ faculty, staff and students. The database allows prospective students and their families, as well as faculty

and staff, to search for institutions that are welcoming, safe and offer support for the LGBTQ+ community, the news release said.

For Kerby, the index is not just a concrete way to prove that WKU is doing better for its current students, but also proof positive that the university is a welcoming school for students and professionals looking for an academic home, and not just those who are LGBTQ, she said.

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The university has made progress considering WKU's index rating in 2016-17 was just two stars, then jumping to three in 2018-19.

A review of its current Campus Pride Index page shows that it's ticking more and more boxes – like adding training for staff, gender-inclusive bathrooms and housing and support groups and spaces on campus where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students can feel supported.

Still, there are also some areas remaining for improvement. Namely, training for campus police on sexual orientation and gender identity issues, scholarships for LGBTQ people and trans-inclusive student health care policies, as a few listed examples.

Some of the ratings may come down to what the university can concretely document and prove and whether the metric itself applies to the school, Kerby said, but WKU will continue working to improve its score, she said.

WKU ranks fourth in the state and just a half of a star behind the University of Kentucky, University of Louisville and Northern Kentucky University, Kerby said.

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