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## Caboni boasts WKU's record retention, achievements at convocation

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Aug 16, 2022



WKU President Timothy Caboni gives his annual convocation speech to several hundred faculty and staff on Monday in Van Meter Hall.

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According to Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni's annual convocation speech, the university's past four years have been ones for the record books.

Caboni addressed faculty and staff in the speech Monday, which looked back at WKU's progress as it heads into the fifth year of its 10-year strategic plan, "Climbing to Greater Heights."

“We’ve accomplished much in the face of numerous unprecedented challenges,” he said.



“We overcame, we succeeded and we achieved excellence across the institution,” he said.

Since the 2016-17 academic year, the six-year graduation rate has risen 10 percentage points to its highest point ever, 57.4%, Caboni said. First- and second year retention figures have also experienced their greatest four-year increases in school history, with 90.9% of first-time, first year students returning for the 2021-22 spring semester.

Underrepresented minority students in particular have been returning in record numbers, Caboni said.

Retention is nearly six percentage points higher among students in Living Learning Communities, smaller student residential communities based on academic or social interests. The university’s 22 LLCs have been “revamped”

in the past two years to promote connections that will boost student well-being and success, WKU spokesman Jace Lux said.

“We’re about where we expected to be a little less than halfway through,” Lux said about WKU’s strategic plan progress.

Also climbing to greater heights is the WKU Opportunity Fund, which was created in 2017 with a \$50 million fundraising goal to support students with financial hardships. The goal was doubled last year after the initial goal was reached, and the \$70.5 million raised to date has created 184 scholarships, Caboni said.

As it stands, about 85% of WKU’s incoming class will receive some institutional scholarship support. But the support extends beyond initial financial help, Caboni said.

This includes investments in student support services, like counseling, academic advising and tutoring.



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It also involves a “restructured” diversity, equity and inclusion team “working tirelessly to make sure every person we bring to campus to study, to teach, to live, to compete or just to visit with us knows that they belong,” Caboni said.

ONE WKU’s Inclusive Teaching Academy just graduated its first cohort of educators and the university is currently awaiting final state approval for a cultural competency certificate for more members of the university community.

Other successes in the past four years mentioned in the convocation speech include:

- Campus facility improvements totaling \$392 million, including Hilltopper Hall, Odgen College Hall, Normal Hall, Regents Hall and Commons at Helm Library;
- Federally-sponsored research improving rural firefighters’ health, exploring new dairy science technologies, creating the largest optical telescope in Kentucky and designing a virtual reality platform to train child welfare professionals on implicit bias;
- Partnerships with regional industry partners to create a collaborative innovation campus at WKU’s Center for

- Research and Development on Nashville Road; and
- Two new programs to address demands of the current job market – one online degree in cybersecurity and one MBA concentration and graduate certificate in supply chain management.

Looking forward, Caboni said that he will be convening a team to evaluate the progress of the past four years as well as “to examine where we need to press harder and to suggest what new things we might pursue.”

In his speech, he mentioned a few initial goals: doubling the number of LLCs, adding more diversity, equity and inclusion programming, expanding the network guiding and encouraging first generation students and adding more research opportunities for all students.

The evaluation team should be forming in the next month or so, Lux said.

Caboni closed his speech with an ode to in-person learning. While he said WKU will continue to be flexible, he stressed the importance of face-to-face community for full engagement.

“We must remain the town center,” Caboni said. “We must come together to gather, to convene, to connect, to strengthen the bonds that bind us to one another and to our institution.”

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