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Caboni says WKU can be BG's 'talent magnet'

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni speaks about his vision for Bowling Green
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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni dreams of a Bowling Green “Knowledge Town.”

In an interview with the Daily News last week, he said he envisions a college driven by community engagement at every level. International tech companies would bring jobs and expertise that shape the region. Nearby businesses would collaborate with university researchers. Local high schools would send dual-credit students to live a campus experience.

“Can we use the strength of the institution to both recruit companies and also recruit talent to come live here?” Caboni said. “Having the opportunity to work with technology companies, AI companies – it’s really positioning us for the next set of growth opportunities for the region.”

The term “Knowledge Town” comes from a book written by Ohio State professor David Staley and financial investor Dominic Endicott, titled “Knowledge Towns: Colleges and Universities as Talent Magnets.”

It describes towns experiencing rapid growth following the COVID-19 pandemic, fueled by a combination of technological interconnectedness and internal migration.

The authors assert that local decision-makers must reevaluate what factors will attract talent, tapping into the potential brought on by a university presence. If they’re successful, it could mean reshaping entire communities.

Caboni didn’t agree with every page, but much of it reminded him of Bowling Green. It got him thinking about the two-way relationship between a university and its

surrounding community.

At the heart of these “growth opportunities” lies WKU’s 20-acre Innovation Campus on Nashville Road.

“What you see is an intentional strategy to reach out to AI, technology, data companies to essentially pitch them on all the benefits of our community, the university and the Innovation Campus as a start, and we’ve just had some tremendous success with that,” Caboni said.

Their success also gives the university a leg up when seeking state funding, allowing it to point to ways that taxpayer dollars have already paid off.

“Given the success we’ve had as an industry, we’re well-positioned to make another request for investment in higher education,” Caboni said. “It’s important for all of us at universities to also be mindful that we demonstrate what we’re doing with those investments and what we’re creating is good for the economy.”

In the last month alone, Hong Kong-based tech company BeingAI announced it will open a U.S. headquarters at the campus. Texas-based Oria Health also announced that its telehealth subsidiary, Lunae LLC, will establish its corporate headquarters there.

Jeanne Lim, BeingAI CEO, told the Daily News in July that Bowling Green “felt like home” while offering “a whole community of creative people that we could tap into.”

The campus is already home to a consortium of metal manufacturers, an augmented reality software company, a fiber optic cable company, an automotive manufacturing company and a nonprofit aimed at enhancing Kentucky's public perception, to name a few.

Caboni said they've even convinced companies, like BeingAI, to choose WKU over metropolitan areas like San Francisco and New York.

"We're blessed with being right on I-65 and within a one-day drive to almost 80% of the country, and that is a remarkable competitive advantage," Caboni said. "Oh, and by the way, the cost of living here compared to Nashville is amazing."



This positioning, Caboni said, also provides access to potential out-of-state students. Caboni said enrollment from Nashville and Chicago has been critical as Kentucky students continue to attend college at lower rates.

The need for an out-of-state “pipeline” of students is heightened by a quickly approaching “enrollment cliff” created by lower birthrates following the Great Recession of 2008.

“If they’re not going to come from here, we have to go find them and get them here so we can do what we need and remain a vibrant institution,” Caboni said. “Our out-of-state strategy has been wildly successful.”

The university’s Border State Scholarship Program is one part of this strategy. Founded in 2020, the program offers in-state tuition for students from Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

In 2017, around 602 students attended WKU from border states, with 374 coming from Tennessee, 128 from Indiana and 58 from Illinois.

Preliminary data for the 2023-24 school year shows the total has grown to 769, with 459 from Tennessee, 148 from Indiana and 132 from Illinois.

But Kentucky students haven’t been forgotten. Caboni said keeping smart young people here can be just as important as importing them from elsewhere.

This fall, the university will begin offering local high school students the chance to take dual credit courses as if they were full-time students.

“We have 12 Warren Central students who will, at some point in the day, hop on a Big Red bus and come to campus,” Caboni said. “They’ll actually go sit in courses with other Hilltoppers, access our advising center, they’ll take lunch at (our student union) – we’re helping subsidize that – and they will see that they’re able to do college while they’re in high school.”

WKU’s Glasgow campus runs a similar program, with students attending orientation last week. Caboni said the 73 students there come from across seven different counties.

“There’s no better recruitment than having someone come to the university and really understand who we are and why we are unlike any other institution in the commonwealth,” Caboni said.

The university also announced in 2020 the “Hilltopper Guarantee,” which offers free tuition to any first-time, first-year freshman from Kentucky receiving Pell Grant assistance with a 3.0 high school GPA.

Overall, Caboni said the benefits of working and studying in Bowling Green have always been here – a diverse workforce, collaborative business opportunities, low cost of living and access to larger markets. They’re some of the factors that he said have helped WKU succeed.

The challenge, he said, is overcoming people’s preconceived notions of what Bowling Green can offer.

“Sometimes it’s just naivete. Sometimes you ask somebody from San Francisco what they think of Kentucky,” Caboni said. “Well, I said the other day, ‘you don’t know Bowling Green unless you’ve visited Bowling Green.’ So before you prejudge us, come see us.”

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Reporter