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WKU's budget, tuition increase approved; president addresses faculty concerns

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Jun 3, 2023

Western Kentucky University's \$390 million operating budget, up \$6.5 million over the previous year, was given the green light at Friday's Board of Regents special budget meeting.

The roadmap for fiscal year 2024 includes a tuition increase, a larger investment in scholarship funds and another salary increase pool.

WKU is increasing how much it spends on institutional financial aid, upping that total by just under \$5.4 million over last year. This is accompanied by a 3% tuition increase, the maximum amount an institution can raise tuition in one year as mandated by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.



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“Our families are struggling, and while we needed to have a moderate increase, we also want to make sure that our net tuition discount, what happens after aid, also remains moderate,” WKU President Timothy Caboni said.

“Sometimes folks look only at sticker price, and it’s important to look at tuition minus the discount.”

He said the increase was also necessary to ensure the university is continually able to provide raises.

According to budget documentation, the university will be taking in an additional half million dollars of tuition revenue following the change. Undergraduate students residing in Kentucky will be paying \$5,718 in tuition, a change of \$162 over the previous year. The tuition schedule for graduate enrollment remains unchanged.

WKU is also projecting an increase in first-time, first-year students, budgeting for 2,832 new faces on the Hill in the coming academic year.

According to the CPE's data center, WKU welcomed 2,575 first-time, first-year undergraduate students in 2022-23.

“The number reported today is a very conservative estimate,” Caboni said. “What we know is that enrollment has been up-and-down in that first-year number for the past several years. What we have to do is regularly have growth in that first-year class and hopefully continue on our path of upward retention.”

The university’s Budget Executive Committee has also recommended a 2% salary increase pool for January of 2024.

“Do I wish that we could have a 5% salary pool each year? That would be awesome,” Caboni said. “But again, I have a fiduciary responsibility. When you look at the numbers, that’s not possible.”

Faculty Regent Shane Spiller brought up concerns he had received from others on campus about faculty representation in the BEC, the body that submits final budget recommendations to university leadership.

“The Budget Executive Committee has five deans and two department chairs – the department chairs serve at the whim of the dean – and three faculty,” Spiller said. “When we ask, ‘why do we not have more faculty representation on the Budget Executive Committee,’ we’re told faculty have short-term interests. All they want is a raise.”

Caboni said the reason for the current level of faculty representation comes down to domains of expertise.



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“The responsibility for managing the budget, setting the dollars, rests with administration and the deans,” he said. “Not with faculty. We’ve created transparency for faculty, we’ve created the ability to have input for faculty. ...But we are not going to have a budget that is controlled by faculty.”

Caboni said he is “concerned” with the narrative that faculty are not included in the budget process.

“That’s nonsense. Faculty are deeply included,” he said. “They’re not going to have the overwhelming number to be able to vote for whatever they want, though. Because it's not in their domain of expertise.”

Spiller also brought concerns regarding how much the dean’s budgets have grown since WKU fully transitioned to its Resource Allocation, Management and Planning budget model for the previous fiscal year.

In the budget for fiscal year 2022, the last year before the complete RAMP transition, the budgets for the five deans of WKU’s colleges altogether totaled \$6.2 million. In FY 2024's budget, that total has grown to just under \$11.4 million.

“What I’m seeing, what I’m hearing, is accusations that there’s ‘empire building’ going on,” Spiller said.

Caboni said there should not be any form of this “empire building” happening inside dean's offices.

“But there may have been understaffing in some of those areas,” Caboni said. “And if my charge to (the deans) is to recruit and retain students and they did not have the ability to do that, particularly on the graduate level, then they’re going to need to bulk that up a little bit.

I think what you're seeing is a natural shift in power, in expenditure power."

The board gave its approval to the new budget. Outgoing student body president Cole Bornefeld, acting as student regent, was the sole "no" vote.

"I had concerns with raising student's tuition. I've spoken with students and they're being affected by inflation just like WKU is," Bornefeld told the Daily News. "The feedback that I've received from students was not supportive of the increase."

On the academic side of things, the board approved the suspension of WKU's minor in Russian and East European Studies due to low enrollment and the death of its primary faculty member.

Along with that, the board approved the creation of three new undergraduate certificates in teaching English to speakers of other languages, strategies for trauma informed approaches to improving resilience and professional and technical writing.

The board will meet again on Aug. 10 for its yearly retreat.