

https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/wku-convocation-highlights-102-million-fundraiser-retention/article_b1cc64cc-8e96-5e88-9b77-de13ec77c230.html

WKU convocation highlights \$102 million fundraiser, retention

By DAVID MAMARIL HOROWITZ david.horowitz@bgdailynews.com

Aug 13, 2024

1 of 6



Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni welcomed in the
to university faculty and staff in Van Meter Hall.

JACK DOBBS / jack.dobbs@bgdailynews.com

Increasing student retention. Funding new endowed scholarships. Building and renovating numerous facilities across campus.

At his Monday morning convocation speech, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni presented a host of updates on numerous initiatives and accomplishments such as those to WKU faculty and staff, at Van Meter Auditorium.

Total enrollment increased 1.2% from last year, indicating an increase for a second year in a row, according to WKU data from last week. The increase comes despite a yearslong nationwide decline in higher education enrollment over the years as well as the U.S. Department of Education's botched national rollout for the federal student aid application form.

Student retention has increased on multiple fronts in the last six academic years, Caboni said. First-time, full-time baccalaureate first-to-second-year retention has increased by 8.1% to 79%, just under the 80% goal of the WKU Strategic Plan. Retention rates for low-income students rose 7.9%, and for underrepresented minority students, it increased 16.9% – more than in any other six-year period in WKU's history, Caboni said.

Additionally, the return rate from last fall to spring increased by 4.5% for students of WKU's Living Learning Communities program, where students who have similar academic or social interests live on the same residence hall floor and can participate in activities specific to their

majors or interests. Preliminary data for the fall indicates that these students have a retention rate 8.1% higher, Caboni said.

In its six years since establishment, WKU's Opportunity Fund, which supplies needs-based financial assistance to students, has grown to \$102 million and established 267 new endowed scholarships, Caboni said. It has provided 20,205 students with private scholarship support.

In raising that money, the Opportunity Fund achieved its fundraising goal, which was doubled from \$50 million to \$100 million at the fall 2021 convocation. Caboni said that for the time being, WKU will "celebrate" the success of the fund and put it on pause. He added that WKU will continue to raise scholarship dollars but pivot to other projects that need fundraising, such as the Gordon Ford College of Business – which currently has about \$9.5 million pledged toward it.

Caboni announced the "First to the Hill Academy," which will assist a cohort of first-generation students in discovering and developing "their scholarly and professional talents." The WKU website defines a first-generation student as a person for whom "neither parent graduated from a traditional four-year college."

WKU will add two mentor programs for these first-generation students to give them guidance, resources and support from staff, faculty and student perspectives, Caboni said.

Caboni also gave updates and reflected on new facilities projects: There's the 11,000-square foot complex for soccer and softball, opened last September; the two-item project for WKU's new press box, which will open in fall, and the Hilltopper Fieldhouse, which will open next fall; the Gordon Ford College of Business, expected to open next fall; the replacement for the Academic Complex, home to the College of Health and Human Services, which has construction scheduled for next summer; and the renovation Cherry Hall, which has work set to begin next fall.

Also:

- Caboni said he will convene two task forces. One will consider revisions to the WKU Mahurin Honors College, its curriculums and programs “that might reinvigorate and elevate (WKU's) offerings and increase interest and availability to an even wider range of WKU students.” The other will explore creating an interdisciplinary school “focused on AI, computational studies and data analytics.”
- WKU is working toward its 10-year reaffirmation of accreditation. Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges since 1926, WKU is now finalizing the off-site compliance certification document; it will culminate in the a decision by the SACSCOC Board of Trustees in December.

David Horowitz