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Caboni outlines WKU priorities

By DAVID MAMARIL HOROWITZ david.horowitz@bgdailynews.com
Aug 16, 2024

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni talks about the : enrollment numbers, the university's budget decisions, the renovation a Administration Center office on Thursday, Aug. 15, 2024. (Grace Ramey M gramey

Currently, Western Kentucky University's top three priorities are ensuring that its major facilities projects stay on schedule, pursuing a higher-level classification as a research institution and planning updates to the Mahurin Honors College, WKU President Timothy Caboni said.

Caboni spoke with the Daily News on Thursday about those priorities. He also gave an update on WKU's plan to apply a 10% overhead fee for WKU's non-academic revenue-obtaining organizations.

The top priority, Caboni said, is facilities – in particular, finishing the Gordon Ford College of Business and Hilltopper Fieldhouse by fall 2025 and planning for the Academic Complex and renovation of Cherry Hall.

WKU's second priority is making progress toward becoming the first Carnegie-classified "R2" institution in Kentucky, offering PhD programs and in that context building curricula that will serve southcentral Kentucky and its economy.

To achieve R2 status, a university must spend at least \$5 million on research and development – which WKU has already more than doubled – and produce a minimum of 20 research doctorates, according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.

Meeting the requirements, Caboni said, will change WKU as an institution.

“It will change the kind of faculty we’re able to attract,” he said. Having PhD students working in labs “changes the kind of research funding we can pursue, and it also changes the relationship with companies. When you have that kind of talent pool available – folks who are PhD-trained in high tech areas – companies who need that kind of talent are much more willing to relocate and partner.”

Caboni said WKU is working to figure out what areas the university would be “most well served” by creating three to five research doctorates.

Concerning the likelihood of offering PhD programs, Caboni said that there’s uncertainty around anything that involves a legislative process but added, “I’m positive we have a good argument for why we should be able to offer PhD programs, and I’m confident we have supporters in the legislature who want that to happen for us.”

Caboni added that he thinks this is compelling for the future of Bowling Green and Warren County.

“For us to diversify our regional economy, we have to be able to attract companies, and one of the ways we do that is by having them relocate here,” he said.

The third priority, Caboni said, is figuring out how to increase access to the Mahurin Honors College and “think(ing) a little bit differently about how it is we embed an honors experience in our academic colleges.”

Caboni plans to convene a task force around the end of September or October.

“The opportunity is for us as a community to ask ourselves, ‘How do we create additional exposure to honors?’ ” he said. “What does that look like, not in the honors college, but in one of the academic colleges, and how can we deepen that experience for our students? ... How do we support students being able to pursue majors that don’t exist here, but they can design for themselves?”

One example, he said, is that WKU doesn’t have micro-biological engineering; however, it does have degrees in engineering and biology as well as a minor in neuroscience. These, he said, can be combined to create an individualized major.

“The honors program creates the ability to do that for students, but not very many students take advantage of it yet,” he said. “And so, I think about, how do you increase that – that intellectual engagement at the edges of disciplines, which is where the most interesting work happens sometimes?”

He also wants the task force to think about how Living-Learning Communities can support engagement for honors students.

“I want to make sure that what we’re doing is just as relevant nationally as it was before, and as innovative as it was in 2007 when we created it here,” he previously told the Daily News after convocation.

Potential overhead costsCaboni said no methodology has yet been decided upon for the administration's controversial plan to add \$24 million to its two-year budget in part by applying overhead costs to WKU organizations – also known as “units” – that generate revenue and aren't academic.

“I think that we don't want to go too far into the fall semester before we make a decision around what the path forward is, but I want us to take as much time as is necessary to make the right choice,” Caboni said.

On June 7, the WKU Board of Regents approved the university's two-year budget realignment plan, which included this provision. It would apply a 10% overhead charge to organizations in a university that aren't academic – such as parking, public media and philanthropy and alumni relations.

He noted these fees aren't uncommon among higher learning institutions and that academic units pay 13%.

“If units are generating revenue using our spaces and facilities, they should help offset the cost of maintaining those spaces and facilities,” he said.

Still, the plan proved controversial, passing in a 5-3 vote.

“I don't think any final decision has been made on that,” Caboni said. “I know units are planning for and work is happening toward it, but I think that there's still opportunities for conversation.”

David Horowitz