

# Bill filed to allow research doctorates at WKU

Published 9:13 am Wednesday, January 15, 2025

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State Rep. Michael Meredith speaks on a legislative panel moderated by former State Rep. Richie Sanders alongside fellow elected officials State Sens. Mike Wilson and Max Wise and State Representatives Robert Duvall, Kevin Jackson and Shawn McPherson to provide updates on their work this legislative session during the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce’s “Coffee Hour” breakfast event at the National Corvette Museum on Wednesday morning, Nov. 20, 2024. GRACE MCDOWELL / DAILY NEWS

A bill proposed last week would allow Western Kentucky University to offer up to five research doctoral degree programs. They must be in areas the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) deems “directly affect(ing) the workforce and economy of Kentucky.”

Rep. Michael Meredith, R-Oakland, said he introduced the legislation, House Bill 118, last Wednesday to help meet Kentucky’s growing workforce needs.

Enabling these doctorates at WKU would clear the path for it to, in years, become the third university statewide to attain one of the top two higher education research classifications of Carnegie Classification, the leading framework for categorizing higher education institutions. University of Kentucky and University of Louisville have the status of Research I (“R1”), the highest Carnegie classification.

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The new bill's passage would pave the way for WKU to obtain the second-highest classification, Research II ("R2") — which would make it the first higher education institution to do so statewide.

Carnegie Classification requires "R2" universities to spend at least \$5 million on research and confer, at minimum, 20 doctoral research degrees on average annually. WKU President Tim Caboni told the Daily News last August that it has more than doubled the expenditure requirement; however, the highest degree WKU confers is the advanced practice doctorate, which is different from a doctoral research degree.

WKU is legislatively categorized as a "comprehensive university," the same as other four-year public higher education institutions statewide except UK and UL. As such, it relies on state legislation to offer any degree above an advanced practice doctorate.

"Kentucky's economy is growing, and its opportunities for work are growing with it," Meredith stated in a Kentucky House Majority Caucus release last Wednesday. "Billions of dollars of investment have been made in the areas around WKU, and the university needs to be able to provide the education necessary for its students to capitalize on the economic growth of the region. These degrees would allow Kentucky students to be leaders in their field and help them continue the economic growth of the state."

Though still early, the most likely research doctorate degree being considered is one in data science, Meredith told the Daily News. WKU launched an undergraduate data science program in December.

Caboni told the Daily News in August that attaining "R2" status is one of WKU's top priorities. He had made the case for its importance at Kentucky's Feb. 27, 2024, House Standing Committee on Education meeting.

"R2' universities create opportunities to translate and apply the narrowly focused, basic research conducted at (R1') universities," Caboni had said. His presentation had added that "R1" universities do this by "developing multi-disciplinary, practical and market-driven research in programs directly tied to industry and workforce needs."

"They often facilitate the transfer of knowledge from academia to industry," he had told the committee. "They engage with the public — disseminating research findings, contributing to public discourse — and they serve as hubs for innovation and creativity that foster an environment that encourages the development of new and innovative ideas, technologies and solutions."

Caboni had told the Daily News in August that meeting the requirements to become an "R2" university would change WKU as an institution.

"It will change the kind of faculty we're able to attract," he had told the Daily News. "(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 has also said 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 had said.

*See continued coverage in the weekend Daily News.*

