

https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/caboni-addresses-wku-approach-to-challenges/article_0e7f3999-0b0f-52f2-923a-f08a860f40f7.html

Caboni addresses WKU approach to challenges

By SARAH MICHELS smichels@bgdailynews.com

Aug 28, 2022



Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni talks Thursday about student engagement, financial decisions and more at WKU's Craig Administration Center during the 2022. ()

[Grace Ramey/gramey@bgdailynews.com](mailto:Grace.Ramey@bgdailynews.com)

“We’re back, and we’re back big-time.”

That's Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni's motto for the 2022-23 academic year, he said in an interview with the Daily News last week.

After more than two years of pandemic adjustments, students are once again trudging up the hill without face masks to get to their in-person classes.



Now, Caboni is looking ahead at challenges on the horizon. He told the Daily News how WKU is positioned to approach several of these, including the long-term impacts of COVID and an upcoming demographic cliff that will require an expansion of marketing and fundraising pools.

While (most) online school is over, the pandemic's isolation has impacted many students' social-emotional development. As social integration is the best predictor of retention, Caboni said, WKU will have to concentrate on connecting students with campus organizations to help them build relationships.

“If you spent two years going to school in your bedroom and then you show up and there are 15 or 17,000 people walking around you, it can be jarring,” he said. “And so we’ve seen a little bit of that this week.”

One way WKU addresses this is with early get-to-know-you events, like Topper Fest and M.A.S.T.E.R. Plan. Another is spreading the word about the support services the university offers.

COVID also made balancing the budget more difficult, which led to “a great deal of belt-tightening as an institution,” Caboni said. Nonetheless, WKU is currently at a net positive position of \$60 million, a significant jump from a -\$40 million position in a five-year period.

“We’ve done that by making difficult choices about holding spending constant, about shaping our workforce, our faculty and our staff in such a way that we’re paying attention to the things that are most important,” Caboni said.

For example, WKU created the Voluntary Separation Incentive Program in 2021 to reduce its operating budget during the pandemic and adjust for dropping enrollment. The buyout program paid many employees to leave the university.

“After that bit of retrenchment, we’re now reinvesting in the places where we see there’s potential growth in enrollment, where there are new degree programs that

should be offered and are interesting to prospective students,” Caboni said.

Looking past COVID and into 2025, there is another obstacle approaching post-secondary education. Babies born during the Great Recession are now reaching college age, and there are fewer of them. The resulting demographic cliff, projected to begin in 2025, will require WKU to adjust to a smaller pool of potential applicants.

TH **Tony Henon**
CONSTRUCTION, INC.

STARTING
Aug.
15th

BEST
of Bowling Green
2022

We would appreciate your vote
for Best Local Home Builder at
www.bgdailynews.com

Caboni said he is less focused on headcount and more focused on net tuition revenue, how the mix of students creates a “stable, predictable revenue stream.”

WKU is addressing this by expanding into broader markets and offering competitive financial packages.

WKU’s Middle Tennessee market has seen 20% growth in the past several years, and as Nashville grows, it will remain a recruitment target. WKU’s border state scholarship, which provides in-state tuition to border-state students with a 3.0 GPA, was partially designed for that purpose, Caboni said.

Bowling Green is also a growing city, but not enough people are pursuing post-secondary education, Caboni said. According to a 2021 Kentucky Chamber of Commerce report, the state generally has between 90,000 and 100,000 job vacancies each month, 65-85% of which require some kind of post-secondary education.

Locally, the new Envision electric battery plant to be built in the Kentucky Transpark will need 2,000 employees, most of which will need four-year degrees, Caboni said.

It’s “an economic development issue for the state,” he said. WKU is doing its part to attract more future workers to post-secondary education through financial aid packages like the Hilltopper Guarantee, which provides free tuition to any student with a 3.0 GPA who received a Pell Grant.

WKU's research portfolio is another competitive advantage in Caboni's eyes.

"We have millions and millions more dollars in research, yet we don't have Ph.D. students to engage in that and so it creates this tremendous opportunity for undergraduate students and we're gonna press upon that it's a differentiator for us," he said.

All this research and financial aid costs money, and as the current principal group of donors approaches "the end of their giving cycle," WKU is using technology to expand its fundraising pool.

Caboni said WKU added a digital engagement officer to use digital channels, like video, in addition to traditional strategies, to connect with exponentially more potential donors.

"You can't keep going back to the same well over and over again," he said. "It eventually dries up."

– Follow regional reporter Sarah Michels on Twitter @sarah_michels13 or visit bgdailynews.com.

Sarah Michels

[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)