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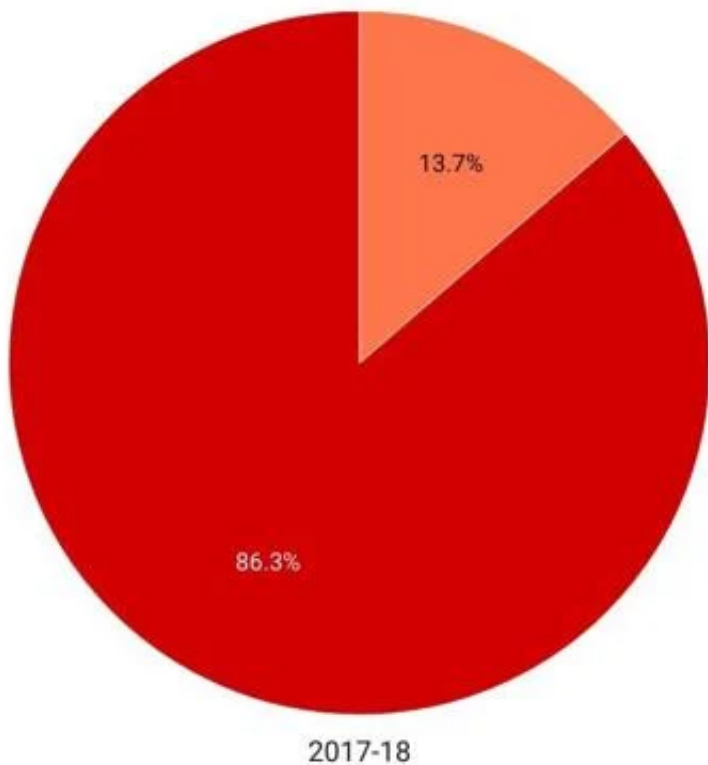
# WKU president talks enrollment sweet spot, record retention rates

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## Fall-to-spring retention rates, first-time, first-year

WKU has reported a 4.8 percentage point increase in first-time, first-year



Retention rates shown as percentages of students returning in the spring.

Chart: Jake Moore • Source: Western Kentucky University • Created with Datawrapper



Timothy Caboni  
Austin Anthony

Western Kentucky University celebrated a high water mark in retention rates this week, announcing that 85.1% of degree-seeking undergraduate students from the fall returned this spring.

It was the highest retention percentage recorded since the university began tracking the figure in 2010.

“Access without success is access to nothing,” said WKU President Timothy Caboni. “And we want to make sure every person to whom we make an offer of admission and we bring here to campus has a more than reasonable chance of finishing a degree.”

First-time, first-year students returned to the Hill at a 91.1% clip, good for a 4.8% increase since the 2017-18 academic year, the first of Caboni’s term. It was also the highest returning percentage for that population since 2010.

“That we’ve moved that for our first-year students, by almost five percentage points in five and a half years, is remarkable,” he said. “Those kinds of moves in higher education are very rare.”

Going by WKU’s different colleges, the Gordon Ford College of Business saw its students return at the highest rate: 86.3% returned overall, and 93.2% of its first-time, first-year students came back.

The College of Education and Behavioral Sciences lagged a bit behind its peers, returning 78.4% of all students and bringing back 88.6% of its first-time, first-years.

First-time underrepresented minority students returned at a rate of 90.8%, an increase of over 10 percentage points since the 2017-2018 academic year.

“The other thing I am most proud of, is if you look back to the fall to spring retention rates of underrepresented minority (URM) students five years ago versus now, we’ve closed the gap

between majority students and URM students to where they're essentially the same," Caboni said.

For Caboni, the numbers are an indication that the university's intervention methods are working. These include financial aid, support through the Intercultural Student Engagement Center, the university's First Year Village and living learning communities, work with first generation students and centralized advising for first- and second-year students.

"All the success, I'm going to give credit where credit is due, belongs to our faculty," Caboni said. "Every day they show up, focused on the success of each of their students ... I think the whole campus community should be excited and proud of the work that we've done."

But there is still more progress to be made.

"In the strategic plan, we talk about a 60% graduation, 80% retention rate," Caboni said. "We have more work to

do, but I think there's so much to be proud of here that the entire WKU family should be buoyed."

The president has been able to share the good retention news with the state legislature, which last year provided the institution with \$85.7 million in state appropriations for FY 2023.

"I think our legislative leadership wants to hear what we're doing with the resources they're investing, and so anytime you can talk about success in a way that's compelling, I think it motivates them," he said.

For those not retained who decided to continue their education elsewhere, four of the top five schools students transferred out to in the fall of 2022 were community colleges. The University of Louisville was the only non-community college to make the list.



A challenge WKU will have to face when reaching for its goals is that fewer high school seniors in Kentucky are pursuing postsecondary education.

“One of the things for me that’s really important for us to address head-on is that 57% of graduating high school seniors used to go to something after (high school),” Caboni said. “... The percentage is now down to 47%.”

The president thinks the university is just about where it needs to be in terms of enrollment, which he said is between 16,000 and 20,000 total students.

“Could we grow? Sure. Could we contract? Sure,” Caboni said. “I do think there’s a question around,

‘what’s the sweet spot’ for WKU ...  
number of first-year students,  
number of total students, number of  
full-time equivalent; and I think  
we’re right about there.”

He said if 57% of Kentucky high  
school seniors were still pursuing  
postsecondary education and if “we  
were growing demographically, I  
think that number would continue to  
escalate.”

The university did see that kind of  
population growth from the mid-90s  
to the early 2010s before slowing as  
the nation’s college-aged population  
began to drop.

“We’re at the beginning of what they  
call the ‘demographic cliff,’ and I  
think the work we’ve done to position  
ourselves, both to scale up and to  
scale back in terms of expenditures,  
will serve us well,” Caboni said.

Enrollment figures are yet to be  
finalized, but Jace Lux, the  
university’s director of media  
relations, shared that total  
undergraduate enrollment presently  
sits at 14,722 students compared to

14,749 this time last year. That number will fluctuate until later in the semester.

Caboni said undergraduate enrollment is “essentially flat,” and while the university has to keep an eye on figures like first-year and total enrollment, there's more behind those numbers than just a headcount.

“While you can pay attention to the first-year enrollment, or whatever the total enrollment is, what really matters is the revenue mix that those create and what first-year enrollment does for three additional years as those folks work their way through a degree program,” Caboni said.

In the realm of recruitment, Lux shared that WKU has admitted 624 more first-time students for fall 2023 over the previous year, a growth of almost 10%. This is bolstered by an increased number of applications coming from Nashville and the development of a stronger Chicago pipeline.



Lux shared that WKU has admitted 171 first-time students from the greater Chicago area for fall of 2023 compared to 144 last year, close to a 20% increase.

“Part of that has to do with the price of education in Illinois, part of it has to do with the University of Illinois capping their enrollment; but we’ve always had a pipeline and it’s growing,” Caboni said.

Caboni said the university deans, recruitment staff and the entire campus as a whole is focused on yielding those additional applications so “we don’t lose them to melt over the summer.”

The president said he was proud of the results the university is creating with an undergraduate population that is 30% low-income students, 30% first-generation students and “approaching 20%” underrepresented minority student populations.

“When you look at the future of the commonwealth and the demographic of who is going to be our audience for higher education, it’s exactly those

folks,” he said. “So I think we’re well-positioned to continue to be successful into the future.”

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