

# WKU achieves record-high retention and graduation rates

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orning, Feb. 18, 2025. GRACE MCDOWELL Western Kentucky University students walk to class on Tuesday morning, Feb. 18, 2025. GRACE MCDOWELL / DAILY NEWS

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Western Kentucky University’s fall undergraduate students maintained an 85.7% retention rate from fall to spring — the highest since WKU began tracking it 15 years ago, according to university President Tim Caboni.

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It was one among multiple retention wins revealed at WKU’s Board of Regents meeting Saturday. WKU’s six-year graduation rate reached 57.9%, which set another institutional record, Caboni said. “Seeing our students succeed year to year is important, but most important is getting their degree,” Caboni said. “As we talk about the work we’re doing as a university to change people’s lives, access without success is access to nothing, and so we’ve made important and difficult strategic choices to ensure the students that we admit and enroll finish their degrees with us.”

Fall-to-fall retention peaked at 78.3% — the highest in WKU history, according to Caboni. Retention among low-income first-year students reached 73.4%, the highest since WKU started tracking it in 2011. Additionally, more than 91% of first-time, first-year students returned in spring — a gain of 4.7 percentage points over the 2017-18 academic year, Caboni said.

“I think that we have to ensure we’re being intentional about who we admit and for what reasons,” Caboni said. “Philosophically, I’m opposed to admitting students who have a high likelihood of being unsuccessful at getting a degree. If we know someone is going to struggle, we need to make sure they’re going to struggle and succeed.” Caboni pointed to programs instituted during his tenure as reasons for the new gains.

“If you think about what we’ve done over the past seven years and what we’ve created — the Summer Scholars Program, ISEC Academy, the work we’ve done around scholarships, centralized advising — what we’re doing is shaping a first year class that has a much higher likelihood of graduating.”

And following changes to WKU’s scholarship program, around 93% of entering students are receiving some sort of aid to reduce costs.

Prior to Caboni’s presidency, the university would admit students with GPAs below a 2.0, according to Caboni. In doing so, he said, they would be sequestered on South Campus — where 80% had left within a year with an average debt of about \$4,000, and where under 5% received a degree within six years.

“We cannot admit students and put them \$4,000 in debt if they have no chance of getting a degree,” Caboni said.

“That is wrong. And we stopped doing it, and we were not going to do that ever again while I’m president.

The reason we exist is not for people to come here as freshmen. We exist to help people get degrees and transform their lives, and to do it as affordably as we can.”

#### **Also at the meeting:**

The WKU Board of Regents approved for the fall a Bachelor of Science in User Experience, an Undergraduate Certificate in Business Fundamentals and an Undergraduate Certificate in Business Law.

The bachelor’s in user experience will focus on design principals and technical development as well as research methodologies to prepare them for the development of user-centered digital solutions, according to WKU. It will be co-located in the Ogden College of Science and Engineering and the Potter College of Arts and Letters.

The certificate in business fundamentals will introduce students who aren’t business majors to “core principles of business administration,” according to WKU.

And the business law certificate, offered via the Gordon Ford College of Business, will focus on understanding business law “from a transactional perspective” to complement their primary areas of study with “essential legal and business skills,” according to WKU.