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WKU eagerly awaits state agency's decision on tuition hikes

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Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni speaks at a tour of Normal Hall, one of the two new First-Year Village residents halls that will be open to freshmen this fall, on Tuesday, May 4, 2021. The \$48 million project will provide housing for over 600 first-year students through an application and review process. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

Anticipating a budget shortfall of nearly \$8 million, Western Kentucky University officials are looking ahead to a key decision the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education is expected to make about how high public universities can raise tuition.

“This is not the final budget,” said Susan Howarth, WKU’s executive vice president for strategy, operations and finance, as she relayed budget recommendations to the university’s board of regents Friday.



With tuition and fees making up the biggest share of its budget revenue, WKU is pursuing a 2% tuition hike for undergraduate students after holding off on a tuition increase last year at a juncture of the pandemic when uncertainty about the fall 2020 semester abounded.

Still, WKU can't move forward with that 2% tuition increase until the CPE makes a decision about where the ceiling should be set on tuition hikes.

“That’s an extremely important parameter,” Howarth said, adding that the CPE is expected to arrive at a decision Wednesday.

WKU is anticipating a shortfall of \$7,882,662, necessitating the need for spending cuts that will be managed by deans and vice presidents across campus, according to budget materials.



Previously, Howarth said these administrators can use “every tool they have in the toolbox” to achieve these cuts. That includes “operational spending reductions, travel reductions, lapse personnel dollars, strategic hiring pauses, etc.,” the board’s budget materials said.

Most of the cuts (54%, or \$4,256,636) will fall on WKU’s academic and support units, while administrative support units will shoulder a smaller share of the burden (46% or \$3,626,024).

Any approved tuition hike will also go toward funding what Howarth described as a 1.5% salary pool to be distributed starting January 2022. The size of the “compensation pool” will total slightly more than \$1 million.

Faculty Regent Shane Spiller voiced concern that staff compensation isn’t keeping up with WKU’s competitors, adding that some staff on WKU’s hill would earn more by working at local fast-food eateries.

“I realize we have staff on this campus who now don’t make what Steak ’n Shake is paying for someone to work year-round,” Spiller said.

Given the staffing cuts WKU made in 2018 and its current move to buy out 125 of its senior employees, Spiller said the university is now down to a “key number of staff,” raising concerns about WKU being placed at a competitive disadvantage.



Regent George Nichols III, on the other hand, framed the university’s financial position through more optimistic terms, stressing the importance of not losing perspective of “how fortunate we are,” compared to other institutions.

Much of WKU’s financial fate will come down to how many students show up for classes in the fall and stick around beyond the first few weeks of the semester, though WKU President Timothy Caboni pointed to hopeful omens that could bode well for the university.

“We’re in a pretty good place,” Caboni said, referring to several positive indicators, like an increase in student housing deposits compared to last year and sign-ups for WKU’s orientation program.

“Those are all things that people have to write a check for,” Caboni told the board, adding the university expects to be “essentially flat for enrollment next fall.”

The university’s fall 2020 enrollment report said WKU drew in 14,225 full-time equivalent students. That’s down from 14,455 in fall 2019.

“It is a difficult year for anyone whose job it is to recruit students,” Caboni said. Recruiters can’t visit schools and college counseling has suffered, he said.

One telling indicator may lie with WKU’s first-generation college students. It’s a key constituency for WKU, but also a vulnerable one that can easily slip through the cracks.

“Right now, our applicant pool is down 25% for first-generation students,” Caboni said. “They don’t have anybody at home to help them navigate the college choice process. They haven’t

had that support from their schools to do that.”

In other business, the regents held a closed session to discuss “the future acquisition or sale of real property by the university.” After the session, the board approved several land transactions.

They include:

- Accepting ownership and transfer of title for 2339 Nashville Road from the WKU Real Estate Corp. WKU leased the land from the REC for parking at South Campus.
- Accepting ownership and transfer of title for 1409 High St. from the REC. It will be used to add 109 spaces to a commuter parking lot.
- Exchanging 513 Regents Ave. for 1564 Normal St., which is owned by the REC. The land on Regents is adjacent to the Cliff Todd Center while the Normal Street property will be used to expand parking for The Commons at Helm Library, set to open this fall.
- Leasing 1537 and 1541 Chestnut St. from the REC.
- Leasing with the intention of selling 1818 Nashville Road to The Hive. The Hive currently leases the property and has asked to extend the lease-purchase agreement for three years.

The board also approved the honorific naming for the Barbara and Kelly Burch Institute for Transformative Practices in Higher Education. The move adds the name of former Provost Barbara Burch, who died in 2020, to the institute she founded in her daughter’s name.

Additionally, the board approved WKU’s 2022-2028 capital projects plan.

The board also approved the dissolution of the Department of Philosophy and Religion. A WKU news release said the action came at the request of the faculty in the department and has been endorsed by Dean Larry Snyder of the Potter College of

Arts and Letters and Provost Cheryl Stevens. All tenured faculty in the department have been accepted into WKU's History and Political Science departments.

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