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Caboni advocates for changes in student loans

By Karah Wilson Messenger-Inquirer
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Timothy Caboni

Timothy Caboni, president of Western Kentucky University, spoke at the Owensboro Rotary Club meeting on Wednesday, advocating for changes in higher education and student loans.

“For higher education, the system does not work,” Caboni said in response to a question about student loan forgiveness. “We’ve got to make sure, on a whole, we’re making sure young people understand what debt is and what that means for their lives.”

President Joe Biden announced Aug. 24 that individuals with federal student loans would receive up to \$10,000 in loan forgiveness, and up to \$20,000 for those who had pell grants. WKU’s average debt load for students is \$25,000, Caboni said.

“That can be paid off, that’s reasonable,” he said. “The stories you hear about \$100,000, \$150,000 and \$200,000 in student loan debt, that is either caused by predatory institutions who take advantage of folks that never graduate, or by folks that have masters degrees, law degrees or M.D., which is a separate issue, but it’s still an issue because we can’t get primary care physicians because who wants to go \$250,000 in debt to get a degree?”



Caboni said higher education institutes “have to do a better job” and be “clear and up front” about how much college costs.

This is not just a political issues, but also an economic issue for the commonwealth, Caboni said.

“We’ve got to help people see higher education is a possibility,” he said.

Only about 40% of high school graduates in Kentucky attend a higher education institution out of high school, according to Caboni, because of the fear of taking out loans and accruing debt.

“We have an obligation as an institution to not bring people in who have no chance of being successful, shame on us if we do that,” he said. “The other is we have to provide support and interventions along the way.”

WKU has implemented several avenues it believes help provide financial support to students.

When Caboni arrived at WKU in the fall of 2017, he said he evaluated the undergraduate student population and found the university was admitting approximately 250 students that had below a 2.0 GPA.

“We put them in something called University College, and it wasn’t even on the main campus,” he said. “If you looked at the success rate for these young people, 80% of them were gone by the next fall. Their average debts were \$1,000, and 2% of them never completed a degree.”

Caboni said he asked what the purpose of the program was and was told it was because the university “needed the revenue.”

“I told them to never say that to me again. We’re going to help those young people get to a place that can support them in a way that we can’t,” he said.

Students with 2.0 to 2.5 GPAs were the next group that were evaluated.

“Those students can be successful but they need something extra,” Caboni said. “We built something called the Summer Scholars Program. If you have a 2.0 to 2.49 (GPA), we think you can be successful, but you’re going to have to meet us halfway.”

Summer Scholars Program is a five-week summer transition program for incoming first-year students. They will move to campus early, complete six hours of college credit and receive personalized support that will help ensure their success.

“Students who earn C’s in those classes can continue on, if they don’t, we’re going to help them get to a place that will provide them the support they need and they don’t have the same amount of debt load,” Caboni said.

Another way WKU is addressing the student debt issue is through the Opportunity Fund, which began in 2017. The fund is focused on removing barriers for access to education with the goal of \$50 million.

“If somebody’s car breaks down, they have two flat tires, and they need those tires fixed and it’s a choice between \$500 to do that or being able to eat, they’re going to eat,” Caboni said. “That also means they’re not going to be able to go to school or to their job to be able to pay their tuition.”

The Opportunity Funds would be a route the student could petition for to receive new tires for their vehicle.

 Karah Wilson

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