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WKU's 2024 budget calls for tuition increase

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Western Kentucky University plans to increase tuition by 3%, which would mark the second time in as many years the institution has raised rates.

Susan Howarth, WKU's executive vice president for strategy, operations and finance presented the Board of Regents with a preview of its FY 2024 budget on Thursday. One of the budget's assumptions is a 3% tuition increase, the maximum one-year increase allowed by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

"If you look over the previous five years, we have had very, very moderate tuition increases given the inflationary pressures," President Timothy Caboni said. "We needed to make an adjustment to our tuition to help buffer from some of that but we also don't want to do that on the backs of our families.

We thought, and CPE thought, that a 3% maximum, even in the context of the inflation that we're challenging will make sure that our families aren't shouldering the entire burden of that."

WKU increased tuition by 1.19% for fiscal year 2023.

Tuition for full-time resident undergraduate students currently sits at \$5,556 and would rise to \$5,723 in the fall if the budget is passed as-is in June.

The board also approved a memorandum of understanding between the College Heights Foundation and WKU that will see the WKU Foundation and College Heights Foundation consolidate their assets in a streamlining measure.

Caboni said this was a way to ensure foundation heads can act independently from university leadership as well as to prevent donor confusion since “donors see (both organizations) as WKU.”

“When I entered, looking at that organization, I thought it made much more sense for those organizations not just to work together but also to not report directly to the president,” he said. “To have that autonomy to make decisions based upon the best interest of the foundation.”

The College Heights Foundation was created in 1923. It manages trusts and administers scholarship funding. The WKU Foundation was chartered in 1993 and handles funds gifted to the university.

The agreement designates the College Heights Foundation as the “primary repository” of gifts made in support of WKU.

“The (College Heights) Foundation now manages WKUF and is responsible, on behalf of WKUF, for performing the obligations and responsibilities of WKUF,” the agreement states.

“It is very much down-in-the-weeds around our endowed accounts,” Caboni said. “But it’s crucially important for our donor understanding (and) also protecting the institution.”

Caboni also brought forward an amendment to the university’s six-year capital plan, wishing to replace WKU’s Academic Complex instead of just renovating it.

The capital plan outlines the projects WKU wishes to complete if appropriate funds are provided by the state legislature. It originally requested \$90 million in renovations to the 55-year-old structure but was amended by the board to ask for \$160 million to replace it.

Caboni said a walk through the building, built in 1967, convinced him that renovations alone would not be adequate.

“Investing \$90 million in a structure that was built 50 years ago to be a 30-year structure is not a good investment of the scarce resources of the state,” he said. “There is never a guarantee of an investment in capital projects so we’ll work hard in the coming legislature and the budget year to see if we can get that into the conversation.”

WKU Football head coach Tyson Helton was given a one-year contract extension, locking him up until the end of 2026. His salary, which was raised to \$900,000 last year, will remain unchanged.

Included in the contract addendum is a provision automatically extending Helton an additional year “following each season the football program wins seven or more games.”

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Helton has a 32-21 record since taking the helm in 2019, going 3-1 in bowl games and leading WKU to an appearance in the 2021 Conference USA Championship. The Hilltoppers have won at least seven games in three of Helton's four seasons as head coach, 2020's 5-7 record being the only stumble so far.

If the university terminates Helton's contract without cause before Dec. 31, 2023, it will be on the hook to pay him \$4 million. If Helton terminates his contract without cause before that same date he will owe \$1.1 million.

The board also OK'd men's basketball head coach Steve Lutz's contract, good through June 30, 2027.

Lutz was hired in March to replace longtime head coach Rick Stansbury. Lutz previously led his Texas A&M-Corpus Christi Islanders to back-to-back Southland Conference tournament championships and trips to the NCAA Tournament in 2021-22 and 2022-23.

Lutz will be paid \$650,000 per year and, according to his contract, will be entitled to 50% of all gross ticket revenues that exceed \$900,000.

Todd Stewart, WKU's athletic director, said Lutz' contract is essentially the same one Stansbury had.

"We feel really good about him, he's been here a little over a month now and has hit the ground running," Stewart said.

A bonus of \$50,000 is on the table for every academic year Lutz' team's academic progress rate is between 950-969 and another \$50,000 for each year the APR is 970 or higher.

Lutz will receive \$50,000 for each NIT appearance and C-USA Coach of the Year honor. An NCAA Tournament appearance, something WKU has not experienced in a decade, will net Lutz \$100,000. C-USA regular season championships will also pay out \$100,000.

"We've had a lot of success in men's basketball but we haven't been to an NCAA tournament since 2013 and that has to change," Stewart said.

If either party terminates the contract before April 30, 2024, they would owe \$2 million.

On the topic of buyouts, Stewart said WKU has received more than it has spent.

"We've been on the net positive on those over the last few years, starting really with Bobby Petrino," Stewart said.

"When he left to go to Louisville, we got \$1.2 million. When Jeff Brohm left to go to Purdue, we got \$900,000."

The recent buyouts for Stansbury and former baseball head coach John Pawlowski totaled \$600,000.

Thursday's meeting also marked the end of George Nichols III's six-year term as regent. Nichols, president and chief executive officer of the American College of

Financial Services and WKU graduate, was the board's sole Black member.

“WKU is completely committed to ensuring that every person on this campus finds their place and belongs, and that's not going to change,” Caboni said. “No matter the board composition, the composition of leadership or who's even sitting in my seat.”

Regents are appointed by Gov. Andy Beshear and can serve up to two six-year terms.

The board next has a special budget meeting on June 2.

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