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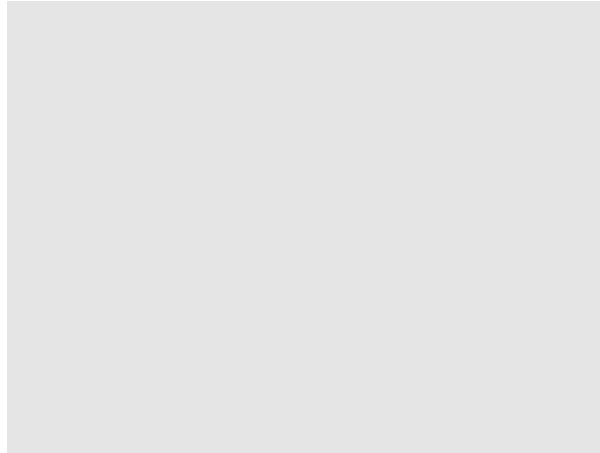
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WKU's efforts to reinvent program offerings will continue

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Nov 29, 2019



Cheryl Stevens

This year marked a radical shift for Western Kentucky University.

In May, it concluded a monthslong review of its 380 total academic programs by approving a plan to suspend 101 programs and transform more than 50 others.

Now, for Acting Provost Cheryl Stevens and the academic units she oversees, the real work is just beginning.

“We want these to be really good, innovative, strategic programs,” Stevens said, adding that the university will undergo a painstaking, iterative process over the next several months.

Since the spring, 57 academic programs targeted for transformation have been asked to start developing plans that will encourage them to be forward-thinking and address “what kinds of programs our region and market will need,” Stevens said.

The programs have been asked to develop concrete plans for their transformation by next spring.

All of this unfolds under the backdrop of fewer high school graduates in Kentucky, and fewer of them going to college. Enrollment figures released earlier this month also showed a decline of nearly 1,300 fewer students attending WKU this fall than the last.

Given all that, Stevens said the university wants a slate of program offerings that will leave it strategically well-placed and ready to square off against the competition.

“It’s about offering a thoughtful, strategic, innovative and forward-looking portfolio of programs to attract students to WKU,” Stevens said.

In developing transformation plans, these programs have been asked to outline a vision for their program’s future and how to get there. They’ve been asked to address how they’ll respond to market demands, how data-driven their decisions are and their plans for retaining students, among other issues, Stevens said. The programs are at different stages in developing those plans, she added.

“By the end of March, they should have really well-established and thoughtful plans,” she said.

Through a separate but parallel effort, 15 academic programs have been targeted for “growth.” Stevens has previously said these programs won’t necessarily get bigger in all cases, but it could lead to efforts to improve a program’s quality.

The label assigned to programs with healthy, growing enrollments means that each year five programs will be selected to begin their growth plans. They can also benefit from additional funds available through strategic investments by the university.

This year’s \$387 million operating budget, approved in June, includes a new \$2.5 million “Strategic Investment Fund,” which acts as seed money for one to two years to create, grow or enhance programs. The university has drawn on about \$500,000 from that pool this year.

So far, those investments have included additional money for several faculty searches and infrastructure improvements, including studio renovations for the Department of Theater and Dance, new equipment for WKU’s Exercise Science program and needed hardware and software upgrades for the Computer Animation program, Stevens said.

When it comes to program review, WKU President Timothy Caboni has previously discouraged thinking of the changes as a “one-and-done opportunity.”

Reacting to the program review recommendations made in May, Caboni said at the time: “What we’re trying to create as an institution is a culture of innovation where every year we evaluate everything that

we're doing and see where there are opportunities for growth, for suspension, for transformation.”

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