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WKU to boost support for first-generation college students

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Robert "Bud" Fischer

Western Kentucky University is launching an initiative to look after a significant though often overlooked constituency on campus: students who are the first in their families to attend college.

Also called first-generation college students, the demographic makes up more than a third of the university's undergraduate student population. That means it's vital for WKU to keep as many as possible – especially given the steady decline in enrollment it's been experiencing for nearly a decade.

To that end, WKU is calling on faculty and staff who were themselves first-generation college students to share their experiences and act as mentors.

Having that kind of support to lean on is crucial, WKU Provost Robert “Bud” Fischer told the Daily News.

Without someone knowledgeable and connected in their corner, those students are often retained at lower levels and have lower graduation rates.

“They don’t have as wide of a perspective on what college is and how to succeed in college,” Fischer said of first-generation college students. “What I hope this does as we build it out is give them the tools to be able to be successful to make the transition from high school to college, but also to be successful in college as time goes on.”

To accomplish that, WKU’s First-Generation Faculty and Staff Initiative will invite campus employees to create video testimonials sharing their experiences as a first-generation college student and attend social networking events geared toward that community.

The project will also aim to build a directory of first-generation faculty and staff at WKU and encourage those employees to place special stickers on their offices and email signatures marking them as a champion of that constituency on campus.

By pairing first-generation college students with faculty and staff who've been in their shoes, Fischer said he hopes the students will see that "they're not alone" and that "these faculty (and staff) have gone through the same challenges, and that they can help them succeed."

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @NewsByAaron or visit bgdailynews.com.

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