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## WKU sees record retention from fall semester

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Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Western Kentucky University announced a record retention rate among first-time, first-year students.

WKU President Timothy Caboni shared the news in a campuswide email Monday. He said 90.9% of the first-time, first-year students who were enrolled at WKU for the fall 2021 semester returned to the university this spring.

The percentage is WKU's highest fall-to-spring retention rate among those students since it began tracking that data more than a decade ago.

The record retention rate is the first time WKU has eclipsed the 90% mark since at least the fall 2010 semester. In 2017, the retention rate among first-time students was 86.3%.

Christopher Jensen, WKU's assistant vice president for student success, said the nearly 5% increase in four years was "exciting" for the school.

"All of us have been working around our strategic plan for student success at WKU," Jensen said. "The record shows that the work of all our staff, faculty and students is paying off."

Jensen theorized that multiple reasons played into the high retention, including the recent addition of The First Year Village, where students are grouped together in Living Learning Communities.

In an LLC, students with interests live together on a residence hall floor and participate in activities tailored to their specific majors or interests.

Students who participated in an LLC during the fall 2021 semester were retained at a rate of 95.2%, which was 5.9% higher than non-LLC participants.



“Those communities create a positive environment for like-minded students,” Jensen said. “We also work with students a lot on financial aid assistance before they arrive on campus so they know what to expect financially. We also changed our advising model to make sure students have appropriate one-on-one time to schedule classes.

“For WKU, it’s positive because we are sending out students to the region who are more ready for the workforce,” he said. “It also shows our recruitment strategies are paying off as well. We want students to know we are an institution they can be successful at.”

Jensen said WKU’s Intercultural Student Engagement Center played a large part in retention of the school’s minority students.

Retention among that group rose from 85.7% among the fall 2020 incoming class to 90.3%

for the fall 2021 class.

That is a nearly 10% increase during the last four years, when 80.4% of the underrepresented minority students in the class that entered in the fall of 2017 returned the next spring.

First-generation student fall-to-spring retention rose from 85.5% for the fall 2020 class to 87.1% among the fall 2021 class, and low-income retention increased from 86% to 88.6% during the same time period.

Caboni pointed out the gains made in those student populations and said the university had allocated “significant” resources to closing the achievement gap.

“Helping students who for so long have been underserved by higher education perform as well as their peers is something of which we should all be proud,” Caboni said. “We’ve implemented an aggressive aid model to address our students’ financial challenges. We’ve expanded our student support services and made them more accessible to students than ever before. And we have worked diligently to connect our students with their peers to facilitate those student-to-student interactions that remain vital to success.”

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