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UA3/10/3 Convocation

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Members of the Hilltopper Family, friends and guests, good morning, and welcome to the start of the 117th academic year at Western Kentucky University!

As we prepare for our students' arrival in the coming days, thank you for your continued work throughout the summer to ensure our students experience a sense of belonging on our campus, that we afford them the opportunity to engage fully in the transformative WKU Experience and that we equip them with the tools needed for success after graduation.

Introductions

This morning we are joined by outstanding leaders from across the Commonwealth and beyond who serve on our governing board.

Please hold your applause until the end as I recognize each member of the WKU Board of Regents present with us today:

- Board of Regents Chair Currie Milliken from Bowling Green, Kentucky
- Regent Doris Thomas from Smiths Grove, Kentucky
- Regent Gary Broady from Franklin, Kentucky
- Regent Shane Spiller from Bowling Green, Kentucky
- Regent David Brinkley from Bowling Green, Kentucky
- Regent Sam Kurtz from Bowling Green, Kentucky

I also would like to thank George Nichols the third, whose term as a member of our Board of Regents ended this summer. George faithfully served and supported his alma mater as a Regent for six years, and we are grateful for his time, energy and tireless dedication. And as we recognize and thank one member of the Nichols family for his service, we welcome another to our Board. I am delighted that last month Governor Beshear appointed CJ Nichols, to whom George is married, to fill his vacancy.

A number of new faculty and staff are participating in their first Convocation with us this morning. If you are new this fall, or have joined us during the past academic year, please stand and allow us to give you a proper welcome to the WKU Family.

We are glad you are here!

Climbing to Greater Heights

This fall we reach a milestone in our university's strategic plan, *Climbing to Greater Heights*, having passed the halfway point of our ten-year journey. I'd like to take some time to reflect on our accomplishments of the past year and also look ahead in the context of our three areas of focus: Our Students, Our Hill and Our Community and Beyond. These go beyond simple organizing principles. They are the cornerstones of how we spend our time; invest our resources; build our partnerships; revise our efforts; and tell our evolving story – to ourselves and to others.

Our Students

Let's begin with Our Students – they are central to everything we do as an institution. I frequently say, it doesn't matter your role here at the university, you have one job – to ensure every student we enroll succeeds and ultimately graduates. To that end, we set a host of lofty goals related to student retention in our strategic plan, including an aggressive overall first-year retention rate of eighty (80) percent.

Retention

In just five academic years, student retention at WKU increased six-point seven (6.7) percentage points. Today, we are at seventy-eight-point four percent (78.4%) - knocking on the door of that 80% goal! Folks, this is an incredible achievement, and our entire community should be proud of where we are today.

During the last five years, underrepresented minority retention jumped fifteen percentage points, the largest five-year increase in WKU's history. And, also during that time, low-income students increased eleven-point one (11.1) percentage points.

The work that we all have done to ensure the success of each of our students is nothing short of remarkable!

Enrollment

While enrollment figures for this term are still preliminary, total enrollment for the fall semester is currently up three-point one percent (3.1%) compared to this time last year. Our consistent retention gains remain key to shielding WKU from the rapid enrollment declines so many higher education institutions continue to experience. However, also noteworthy this year is an increase in the size of our entering freshman cohort—also currently up three-point one percent (3.1%) – and the enrollment of our graduate students, currently up nine percent (9.05%).

Entering Class

Once again this fall, we are on track to welcome one of the most academically talented first-year classes in our university's history. Our incoming class boasts an average GPA of three point four nine (3.49), up from 3.31 in the fall of 2017.

And these talented students continue to excel.

Last year, The WKU Forensics Team maintained its national success, winning the National Forensics Association National Tournament sweepstakes championship; the Asynchronous Speech Championship; NFA-LD Grand Prix; and the combined team sweepstakes national championship at the Pi Kappa Delta National Comprehensive Tournament. The Kentucky Forensics Association also crowned WKU as the Grand Champion for the thirty first consecutive year. Congratulations, Forensics.

WKU civil engineering students placed fifth in the American Society of Civil Engineers' Concrete Canoe Competition and eleventh (11th) in the Utility Engineering and Surveying Institute competition.

Hilltoppers finished third in the Hearst Journalism Competition, its fourteenth straight top five national ranking. WKU has placed in the top eight for thirty consecutive years with four overall national championships. And a recent WKU graduate became the school's sixteenth individual national champion since 1985, winning the 2023 Hearst Multimedia National Championship.

Our students are simply amazing.

Living Learning Communities

Now, you may recall that at my investiture we announced the creation of the First Year Village, but more importantly, the integration of Living Learning Communities as a key component of our student success strategy.

During the past three years, we offered on average twenty Living Learning Communities, with at least one in every academic college. Because of the remarkable efforts of the nearly thirty committed faculty and staff supporting these communities, students participating last fall returned in the spring at a rate of ninety-five-point seven percent (95.7%) - six-point two (6.2) percentage points higher than non-LLC participants. And the number of students accepting offers to participate this fall is up thirty-four percent (34%) from just two years ago! We now have almost a third of our entering class engaged in an LLC.

But we must do more in this area. It is a differentiator for our university and is shaping how prospective students perceive us. More importantly, it alters our first-year academic experience, building deep and meaningful relationships with faculty and student peers around academic areas of interest early in their careers.

So, in conjunction with our Student Life Foundation partners and the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Enrollment and Student Experience, we must begin working now toward completing the other half of the first-year village in the next several years. We face continued competitive pressure on the student housing front, so we must create an achievable replacement strategy for Douglas Keen and Hugh Poland Halls, which also will ensure that we have the physical space to meet the ever increasing demand for participation in our LLCs.

First Gen

We have made great strides in improving retention of first-generation students, increasing almost ten percentage points, from sixty-point seven percent (60.7%) to seventy-point four percent (70.4%) since 2017. This is terrific progress, and we should be proud of the movement. But there still is a twelve percent (12%) difference in retention between first-gen and non-first gen students.

To meet our overall retention goals, we must continue to grow support for these students – and we have.

Last year, we reached more than five hundred (500) first gen students through targeted programs and now have eighty-five (85) faculty and staff engaged in this work. We also partnered with the Alumni Association to launch the First Gen Alumni Advocates program to connect first-generation alumni with first-generation students from day one on the Hill.

And we continue to integrate first gen programming into our recruitment efforts. This summer we hosted an inaugural First Gen Summer camp for area high school students, and we integrated a First Gen Parent session into our Head for the Hill recruitment events. And this fall, we launch the First Gen Living Learning Community.

As a result of all this work, The [Center for First-generation Student Success](#) recently selected WKU as a member of its First Scholars Network - for institutions demonstrating commitment to improving experiences and advancing success for first-generation college students.

Belonging

Last August, the ONE WKU campaign received the Excellence and Innovation Award from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. And while I'm proud of that national recognition, I'm more proud of the work done to create and launch the next iteration of ONE WKU to ensure all members of the WKU Hilltopper Community have access to a welcoming campus; inclusive infrastructures and services; and ethical and transparent policies. The reimagined ONE WKU focuses on four main areas: the success of every student; mental health and well-being; active and engaged learning; and mentoring and social support for the entire campus community.

Also last year, Our Jonesville reconciliation workgroup hosted two events - a reception in October at the Kentucky Museum to honor the history, community and legacy of Jonesville and a daylong symposium in April to continue this important conversation.

And in October, we dedicated Munday Hall in honor of Margaret Munday, the first Black undergraduate student to enroll at WKU. I was delighted to welcome Ms. Munday, as well as dozens of her family members, friends and former students, to our Hill as we dedicated our first campus building named after an African American individual.

We will continue our work to ensure every member of our community is supported and finds their place of belonging at WKU.

Our Hill

The second area of emphasis in our strategic plan is Our Hill.

Our Hill is both the physical location and symbolic representation of our university. This section of the plan advances our work to provide high quality instruction, to offer robust and responsive curricula and degrees and to support and grow scholarly and creative activities.

Colonnade

Maximizing the potential of every student shapes and guides our institutional choices, and it begins with WKU's unique approach to general education courses.

During the past two years, as part of the Kentucky Graduate Profile Academy, WKU worked with CPE and our sister institutions across the state, to consider the skills employers seek in our graduates. They also explored how educational experiences, inside and outside the classroom, ensure alumni can articulate and demonstrate these skills, as described in the Kentucky Graduate Profile.

Now, sometimes universities and companies seem to speak different languages and talk past each other. And I have to admit I bristled a bit when I first heard the word "skills" related to our curriculum. But listen to just some of what they represent: written and oral communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, quantitative reasoning. The list goes on, but these are exactly the learning outcomes we build in Colonnade, our core curriculum.

Colonnade is unique in that it builds in a scaffolded manner, so that students start by developing foundational capacities, then exploring how knowledge is created in myriad ways, then ends with interdisciplinary connections, discovery, reflection and application.

So today, we boldly recommit to the Colonnade General Education program. I am charging the provost and academic affairs to examine Colonnade and its role in preparing students for a life and career in a global context; to ensure it meets our expectations for graduating Hilltoppers with a breadth and depth of knowledge; and to confirm that every WKU student leaves us with the essential skills not only to succeed in their major programs of study, but in their professional lives beyond graduation.

This work will include celebrating the faculty who teach these critical courses. And we must shift the rhetoric of Colonnade courses among some, from being those to "get out of the way" to those that complement majors and provide essential and valuable educational experiences.

This does not mean that the Colonnade program necessarily changes; it means we will see a new focus on the original intention, overall perception and delivery of the program. The Provost's Office and those involved will share more information with you this fall.

Early College Programs

This past year, Academic Affairs, our regional campuses and our Dual Credit Office broadened opportunities for students in our region to begin their studies with us while in high school. Last fall, at the twentieth anniversary celebration of our Glasgow campus, I announced the Early College at WKU in Glasgow, a partnership between WKU and area school districts that allows high school juniors and seniors at the seven high schools closest to the Glasgow campus to complete an entire year – thirty (30) hours – of a WKU degree before graduating high school. This fall, seventy-three (73) high school juniors begin their WKU Experience, participating in five high-demand career tracks: Agriculture; Business; Crime and Legal Studies; Education; and Nursing.

I also am pleased today to announce a pilot for the Warren County Early College Program at WKU. Beginning this fall, twelve Warren East High School juniors and seniors will take courses with us as Hilltoppers, spending half of each school day on our Hill. These students will engage fully with our campus, using Hilltopper transit services, taking their meals at Fresh, accessing academic support services and participating in recreational activities. And this pilot will expand in coming years to include students from across Warren County.

Finally, let me share with you a partnership between Jefferson County's Waggener High School and WKU. Waggener High School College now allows Waggener students to take WKU dual credit courses, progressively increasing in difficulty each year. More than sixty seven percent (67%) of the participating students come from economically under-resourced backgrounds and more than sixty-one percent (61%) from underrepresented backgrounds. And this fall, we welcome more than ten percent (10%) of Waggener's graduating class to our Hill to study with us!

I applaud these partnerships, years in the making. We remain committed as an institution to eliminating barriers to higher education and postsecondary attainment in the Commonwealth and our region. These programs exemplify our efforts to increase the college-going rate in our service area and beyond.

Research

Last year, I discussed the importance of federal research grants and other extramurally funded research in differentiating WKU from other institutions in our state as we create unparalleled research opportunities for undergraduate students.

WKU faculty and staff were awarded federal grants this past year from the NSF, the CDC, the NEH, the US Department of Education and many more federal agencies. Our R&D expenditures for fiscal year twenty-two (FY22) totaled nearly eight million dollars (\$7.72 million), an increase of eleven percent (11%) over the previous year. And our total external funding expenditure grew from sixteen million dollars (\$16 million) to twenty-six million dollars (\$26 million) in fiscal year twenty-two (FY22).

Our success in growing sponsored research is supported by our direct investment in faculty and student research support. Last year, the Research and Creative Activity Program, or RCAP, awarded nineteen (19) grants totaling two hundred forty-six thousand dollars (\$245,926), and we distributed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) in Quick Turn-Around Grants. We awarded seventy-four (74) Faculty-Undergraduate Student Engagement, or FUSE grants totaling two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$275,000) up from forty (40) students and one hundred forty-five thousand dollars (\$145,000) the previous year. And our Graduate Student

Research Grants provided even more student research activity support. Last year, we awarded over fifty-eight thousand dollars (\$58,525) in Graduate Student Research Grants compared to just thirty thousand four hundred dollars (\$30,394) the year before.

WKU remains well positioned to respond to shifts in federal research priorities. One important example is our participation in a research team competing for significant regional funding as part of the National Science Foundation's Regional Innovation Engines program. WKU is a partner in a Kentucky and Tennessee effort called Generate Advanced Manufacturing Excellence for Change - or GAME Change for short, that received one million dollars (\$1 million) to create a diverse innovation and talent development hub. The idea is to secure U.S. competitiveness in Next-Generation Manufacturing (NGM) and supply chain logistics and also support closed-cycle manufacturing to reduce waste and increase efficiencies in our region.

Our Center for Environmental and Workplace Health also received a nine hundred eighty-three-thousand-dollar (\$983,000) Training Project Grant to train the next generation of leaders in Occupational Safety and Health practice and research.

Other external grant awards supported the creation of the Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success; the expansion of Bingocize; and a project to address the shortage of nurses in Kentucky's healthcare facilities.

Innovative research requires an investment in infrastructure in our laboratories. In the past year, WKU received four hundred sixty thousand dollars (\$460,000) in federal funding to upgrade instrumentation and equipment in five of our research centers, thanks to our federal delegation in Washington, DC.

Our research portfolio remains strong, diversified and robust. We will continue to support the pursuit of extramural funding. But I want to us to do more. When I announced our 80-60 goal for retention and graduation, I am well aware there were many sceptics across campus. But look at how much we have achieved with our laser like focus on that challenge.

Today, I want to announce a new goal that will stretch us and test us. In the next five years, WKU will grow total external research funding expenditures to forty million dollars (\$40 million) and will double the research funding we receive from the federal government.

I know this is a tall task for our faculty, staff and for both Academic Affairs and our Office of Research.

For us to be successful, we will need to increase flexibility in the distribution of faculty effort. It will require us to make smart, targeted investments from the strategic investment fund. And it will require us to concentrate our efforts on areas that reach across our academic and disciplinary silos.

Last year, I challenged our deans to think creatively about the needs of our region, the challenges we face globally and the problems we must solve. They spent considerable time listening to advisory groups and industry partners, surveying the landscape of their disciplines, and thinking about how we might better align our work with the demands of our region and beyond.

To continue this work, this fall, we will convene a group of stakeholders from across campus and beyond to identify a set of Grand Challenges WKU will strive to address. These will serve as north stars for our growing research capacity and serve to hone our focus on some of the most vexing issues facing our region, Commonwealth and nation. We face many pressing, complex challenges across multiple domains, and universities are uniquely positioned to address them head-on. I hope you are as excited about the possibilities in all of this as I am.

Our Community and Beyond

The final section of our strategic plan is titled Our Community and Beyond, and it highlights the importance of preparing our students to work in a global context, the need to attract voluntary support and investment in our university and our unique role as a regional lighthouse in our community and region.

Global Study

We have a long and proud tradition of international education and study abroad at WKU. We remain committed to creating experiences for our students that transform the way they see and experience the world by encouraging and enabling them to study in places around the globe.

Hilltoppers benefit from study in WKU in England at Harlaxton Manor, Semester at Sea and other faculty-organized trips, as they have for the past thirty (30) years. This year, WKU Study Abroad participation rebounded to four hundred seventy-eight (478) students, just three shy of the total participating pre-pandemic.

In 2021, the United States Department of State awarded WKU an "IDEAS" grant to research and develop Study Abroad programs for students from rural areas, meeting our mission of creating opportunities for EVERY student to study abroad.

Through this work, WKU created Counties to Countries, or our C2C, program, developing study abroad opportunities that target first and second-year students from rural areas. Beyond the educational experience, this is important because WKU students from rural areas who study abroad are more than twice as likely to graduate than their high school classmates who did not.

We know global study can play a key role in a student's initial connection to their academic program, to their retention and to their ultimate success. So, we linked C2C to our Living Learning Communities. I am pleased to share that this summer, the program's inaugural year, forty-two (42) students studied abroad on three C2C programs.

Professor Martin Stone led thirteen agriculture LLC students on the "Coffee, Chocolate and Sustainability" program in Costa Rica; Dr. Amy Nemon and Dr. Jill Brown guided nineteen (19) Earth and Environmental Science LLC students around Ireland in "Ireland: Mystic Landscapes of the Emerald Island"; and Political Science Professor Dr. Sandra Ardrey brought ten ISEC Academy LLC students to "Explore Senegal."

We know financing global study is the biggest hurdle to student participation. But we are addressing this head-on at WKU. This year alone, Hilltoppers received more than six hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$675,000) in study abroad scholarship support.

From our local WKU "World Topper" Scholarship, which provides generous awards for study abroad, to national competitive awards, we are working to ensure every student who wants to participate will have the means to do so.

Last year, fifty-one (51) WKU students were awarded Gilman Scholarships, totaling more than two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000). WKU students received more Gilman scholarships than all other Kentucky universities combined. And to date, our students have received one million dollars (\$1 million) in awards from the program!

Seven WKU students received one hundred nine thousand dollars (\$109,000) in Critical Language Scholarships.

Six graduates received Fulbright Scholarships totaling eighty-one thousand dollars (\$81,000).

And of those forty-two students I spoke of earlier who participated in this summer's C2C program, twenty-nine (29) received three thousand dollars (\$3,000) each to participate.

I want to note the tremendous work of our colleagues in the Office of Scholar Development who do a remarkable job supporting students applying for Gilman and other competitive national scholarships. Their work remains vital to WKU's overall international success and to communicating to a national audience the level of talent we attract and grow at our university.

While we remain keenly focused on growing our Study Abroad programs, what we also know is this: global is local for our community.

Forced human migration continues to plague our world, with refugee students forced to flee their homes and their families - leaving their studies behind, often at very short notice. Our community continues to support these populations and we are better for the additional richness they provide to our city.

Bowling Green now has the largest per capita refugee population in the United States, and Kentucky ranks fifth per capita in refugee families who now call the United States home.

Last year, the legislature created a ten-million-dollar (\$10 million) scholarship support program to help documented refugee students studying in Kentucky. WKU received nine hundred fourteen thousand dollars (\$914,000), the majority of which supports students on our campus. We welcomed twenty (20) degree-seeking refugee students to the Hill last spring. And this fall, we anticipate forty (40) refugee students will study with us. Now, we have Hilltoppers from Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo and Ukraine.

I want to thank everyone involved in supporting these students and making this possible: Global Learning and International Affairs, our faculty and deans, the Provost Office, Financial Aid, the Registrar, Admissions and many more, coupled with the collaboration with the International Center of Bowling Green, the local refugee resettlement office, Refuge BG, Mayor Alcott and the City of Bowling Green.

WKU remains an institution of opportunity, and we will remain accessible to every person who wants to pursue a degree, including our resettling refugees.

Campus Investment and Philanthropy

Since 2017, through capital investments from the legislature along with private philanthropic support, asset preservation funds, and revenue streams from external partners, we have invested four hundred eighteen million dollars (\$418 million) into campus improvement projects.

We opened The Commons last fall, and it has been remarkably well received by our community, with continuing high volume, daily use of a facility that is busy from the moment it opens until we have to ask people to leave at closing time.

The Commons also serves as the cornerstone of the Hilltop Restoration Project, making the top of the Hill more accessible and easier to navigate and providing unique outdoor spaces for our community to gather. Now, The Commons, the Colonnade, Ivan Wilson Fine Arts Center, Potter Hall, Van Meter Hall, Gordon Wilson

Hall and Cherry Hall, create an oval academical village, returning the top of our Hill to the original design envisioned by President Cherry and our founding architects.

In June, we broke ground on a new Gordon Ford College of Business building, which will open in 2025. This state-of-the-art facility will help prepare the next generation of business professionals, support academic innovation among faculty and staff, sustain the college's enrollment growth trajectory, enrich the region's business community and, of course, enhance the beauty of our campus. I'd like to recognize our state legislature and our local delegation for their support of this seventy-five million dollar (\$75 million dollar) project.

Next month, we will open our new Softball/Soccer Complex and this fall will break ground on the Hilltopper Fieldhouse, which will position our student athletes for additional success. But more than an athletics facility, the Fieldhouse also will provide unparalleled, technology-rich, indoor practice spaces for our Big Red Marching Band, our E-Sports teams, and our Forensics team - the nation's best and winningest speech and debate team. I don't know what a fathead - you know those life size stickers of football players - will look like for forensics, but we are going to find out!

Cherry Hall, one of WKU's most iconic and important buildings, will undergo a thirty-million-dollar (\$30 million) transformation set to modernize the eighty-five-year-old building while preserving its history (and the marble staircases) and strengthening its significance on campus, much as we did with The Commons. We began a comprehensive study of the structure this summer, with planning to continue throughout this year.

Our Division of Philanthropy and Alumni Engagement continues to partner with our university as we reimagine our campus infrastructure and programs and creatively elevate the ways in which they support our students, faculty and staff.

In the coming years, we will augment the funds from the legislature for the business school building with over ten million dollars (\$10 million) in naming opportunities within the new Gordon Ford College of Business facility. We have found significant philanthropic interest from alumni and the regional business community and are hard at work soliciting these prospects.

To continue promoting academic excellence, this year we will leverage the state's Bucks for Brains matching program to create opportunities for WKU alumni and friends to support our faculty and their scholarship and to recruit even more to talent to our ranks.

And finally, I am so pleased to share that this academic year alone, WKU provided more than nine thousand, seven hundred and ninety-five (9,795) students with university scholarships totaling more than fifty-six million dollars (\$56 million). And our Opportunity Fund, which we established in 2018 with a goal of raising fifty million dollars (\$50 million), continues growing toward a new goal of one hundred million dollars (\$100 million) with more than eighty-seven point three million dollars (\$87.3 million) raised and two hundred and seventeen (217) new endowed scholarships created!

Innovation Campus

We spent the last five years transforming our Center for Research and Development into a true Innovation Campus, building an environment where students, staff and faculty connect with entrepreneurs, industry leaders and business resources to create jobs, to develop talent pipelines and to propel our regional economy.

I am pleased to share with you that the past twelve months marked an especially critical juncture for our Innovation Campus, cementing its role as the epicenter for our region's growing business and technology

ecosystem. A facility that provides life to research, emerging technology and economic and cultural development.

I am pleased to highlight several Innovation Campus successes this morning.

We welcomed the Metals Innovation Initiative headquarters to the campus. Better known as MI2, it is a consortium of manufacturers launched nearly a year ago here at WKU to develop metals industry solutions and innovations, one of our economy's leading sectors. From their leadership on a range of grant-funded research to the Metals Innovation Search and inaugural "Factory of the Future" Conference next month, MI2 exemplifies the Innovation Campus's mission to create meaningful corporate engagement tied to research.

The Innovation Campus also opened its thirty thousand (30,000) square-foot Collaborative SmartSpace, an open-concept venue connecting entrepreneurs and professionals with one another to share their skill sets, insights and resources. With no advertising and through only networking and word of mouth, the space now has more than two hundred (200) individuals utilizing the facility, with even more to come.

We also have had some tremendous success recruiting new technology companies to co-locate with us. MyXR Inc., an augmented reality and engagement software company founded in the San Francisco Bay Area, selected the Innovation Campus as its new regional headquarters; Dallas-based entrepreneur Amanda Havard chose the Innovation Campus as the home for Lunae, a new innovation management service company; and just last month, Hong Kong start-up beingAI announced the establishment of its world headquarters at the Innovation Campus. These three companies join the many companies already located at the Campus, including Holley Performance Products, Logan Aluminum and Kentucky to the World.

And we continue supporting the leadership teams of companies like Envision, Tyson and O-I Glass, while also celebrating the ongoing growth and success of companies previously founded onsite, including Eyeconic, Eezy, Forerunner, Novo Dolce Restaurant Group and Kentucky Thermal Institute.

And I am really excited about this. Through Stupp Fiber (another company which recently located with us), The Innovation Campus is on track to become one of the fastest internet connected facilities in the country, thanks to the soon-to-be-activated one-hundred-gig internet capability. Stupp also is offering a ten-gig capable networking solution to homes and businesses in the area, making Bowling Green the first ten-gig capable city in Kentucky, and one of only thirteen ten-gig cities in the United States.

While we recognize the extraordinary work underway at our Innovation Campus, we also acknowledge that none of this is possible on our own. The success experienced during the last year is only because of the tremendous collaborations with community partners, and on behalf of all of our faculty and staff, I would like to thank Bowling Green Mayor Todd Alcott; Warren County Judge Executive Doug Gorman; Bowling Green City Manager Jeff Meisel; and Bowling Green Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Ron Bunch, for your partnership.

WKU has a long history of producing great talent. Unfortunately, many Hilltopper graduates leave the region to pursue their careers to their full potential. But because of this work, across entities and throughout our organizations, to create a stronger and more diverse regional job market, more and more graduates will find opportunities to call Bowling Green home.

So, to Doug, Jeff and Ron, thank you. Thank you for sharing our vision and for joining hands with WKU to shape the future of our region.

Knowledge Towns

And what a region it is. Warren County's growing population makes the work taking place at our Innovation Campus even more important.

In 1990, Warren County's population stood at seventy-seven thousand, nine hundred and forty-two (77,942), the seventh largest county in the Commonwealth.

During the next thirty years, it grew by seventy-two-point six percent (72.6%) to one hundred thirty-four thousand, five hundred and fifty-four (134,554) - elevating our county to the fifth largest in the state. Much of this was due to a boom in automotive and manufacturing investments in our region.

Now, The Kentucky State Data Center expects this astonishing growth to continue for decades, estimating a population increase of nearly seventy-five thousand (75,000) by 2050, landing at approximately two hundred and ten thousand (210,000) residents and elevating our county to the third largest in the state only behind Jefferson and Fayette Counties, the home of Louisville and Lexington.

It's no surprise that in December Reuters coined Bowling Green "the next big city."

We are poised, at this moment in our history, to shape the future of our city and our region, to define the jobs and companies we want to create and attract. We must embrace diversifying our regional economy and leveraging the growth of Nashville to our south. We must cultivate and grow our burgeoning technology and data sector.

We know Bowling Green is a great college town – but can we become a great *Knowledge Town*, as professor David Staley at Ohio State calls them? Knowledge Towns leverage their universities to become talent magnets and elevate their regions and transform their economies. We are excited and committed to deepening our partnerships with city, county and chamber officials to harness the power of technology and talent to build economies, to ignite entrepreneurship and to tackle challenges – for the betterment of our region and our Commonwealth.

Spirit of WKU

And now, my favorite part of Convocation - recognizing our Spirit of WKU Award winner. An individual selected for representing enthusiasm for WKU; loyalty to the institution; and principles of the WKU Experience and its motto "The Spirit Makes the Master."

Since joining WKU in 1990, this year's recipient has served the WKU Community – our faculty, our staff, our students and our alumni – and has been an exceptional ambassador for WKU through his focus on financial literacy. Please help me congratulate Dr. Indudeep Chhachhi!

Dr. Chhachhi serves as Chair of the Finance Department in the Gordon Ford College of Business. As the selection committee noted, his thirty-three (33) years of service to WKU, to our students and to our community and beyond makes him more than deserving of this recognition.

During this time, he led and served on many strategic committees to advance the university, the Gordon Ford College of Business and the Department of Finance and chaired the WKU Budget Council. He currently serves on the WKU Foundation External Investment Advisory Board.

An award-winning professor, Dr. Chhachhi established programs to educate students and prepare them for a competitive global marketplace through experiential learning, professional development opportunities, internships and more. He directs the Tennessee Valley Authority Investment Challenge for WKU Finance majors who manage a five hundred-thousand-dollar (\$500,000) portfolio; he accompanies students to the annual TD Ameritrade National LINC Conference; and he collaborates with organizations, such as ARGI Financial Group, to bring real-world experiences into the classroom.

Professor Chhachhi works with ISEC, TRIO Programs and the Financial Aid Office to educate students on financial literacy and even developed a partnership with Abound Credit Union to support financial literacy training through the Summer High School Finance Camp.

His financial literacy work extends beyond our campus. He coordinates the annual WKU Personal Financial Planning Symposium for practitioners across the region and the Senior Citizen Personal Financial Literacy Workshop as part of the WKU Lifelong Learning Initiative. He serves as a member of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's Public Pension Task Force and delivers presentations throughout the region, state and nation.

Colleagues, please join me in congratulating the 2023 Spirit of WKU award recipient, Dr. Indudeep Chhachhi!

Closing

Colleagues, as we welcome the academic year ahead, thank you for bringing the WKU Experience to life every day on our campus. Our continued press on recruitment and retention, academic innovation, research and hands-on learning, Innovation Campus and fundamental student programming, like Colonnade, Living Learning Communities, First Gen and global study, is only possible because of our talented and dedicated faculty and staff.

Our students' continued success validates our work to provide a transformational educational experience in an environment where they feel welcomed, engaged and supported in their aspirations.

Thank you for helping our Hilltoppers flourish. I look forward to a remarkable semester and year as we continue climbing to greater heights. Go Tops!