4-27-2018

UA3/10/1 Investiture Address

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Thank you

Before we begin today, there are a few groups and individuals I would like to recognize and thank.

First, to the Board of Regents, thank you for your belief in me and for entrusting me with the responsibility to guide this university. Your support and commitment to WKU enables our climb to new heights
During the course of my life and my career in higher education, I have had countless interactions, conversations, struggles and teachable moments. Each of these in some way shaped my world-view, added to my conceptual scaffolding and prepared me to serve in this role.

To my higher education colleagues in New Orleans, Nashville, Lawrence, and now Bowling Green: Thank you for your support, your challenges, your friendship and your teamwork. No accomplishment or success with which I have been associated in my career has been of only my own doing.
It all has been the result of talented groups pursuing shared goals. I hope each of you can take pride in today as partially a celebration of you and your work.

To my students, during every higher education course I have taught in the past almost 20 years, I have learned as much as I have shared and I am thankful for every one of you.

To Bernadette Gray-Little, thank you for taking the chance on a young associate dean from an ed school to serve as your public affairs vice chancellor.
I am grateful for having had the opportunity to serve with you and for all I learned from your example of how to lead with grace, strength, compassion and unwavering core values.

To my parents, thank you for instilling in me a love of education and teaching, and for modeling how it can change lives, both through your words, and more importantly through the example of your careers. I also am very appreciative that you let me stay awake at nights, with the light on, to read in bed. That has proved a very helpful habit.
And finally to Kacy, thank you for your support, your love, and for being willing to be part of this grand adventure, even on those occasions when it seems less than grand. I love you.

**Shared Vision**

Most have you have heard the story about how I got to WKU for the first time. This is where, for me, my path forward in higher education truly began - here, on this hill, with faculty who were committed to investing their time, their energy and their faith in me, a young graduate student from Louisiana.
I came here with no connections, sight unseen, following a brief, simple telephone conversation with Randy Capps. And this is where things clicked for me. I came to understand how a university could be more like a family and how one’s peers, mentors, and teachers could influence a student’s aspirations, goals, and perspectives.

I also experienced for the first time how the theories I learned in the classroom connected to the world around me. It shaped everything that I would do later: As I moved on to Loyola, Vanderbilt, then to Kansas, and now back to WKU.
We often talk to prospective students about WKU being a place where your professors know your name; where you can apply what you learn to gain experience that will lead you to a successful career; where you will create lifelong friendships and connections; and how this Hill and your time here will remain special and important, no matter where life takes you.

For me, WKU is all that and much more. I want others to have that same experience. That’s why I came back to WKU. And I’m so honored to work alongside each of you as we continue to advance this remarkable institution.
As we work together to reimagine Western Kentucky University and chart our course for the next decade, I want our shared vision to retain what is most special about this place. What must remain the heart of everything we do, that, at its simplest, our mission is to transform the lives of our students, which in turn improves the quality of life for their families and elevates the communities where we all live and work.

The national conversation around higher education challenges our traditional thinking about what universities do.
Issues of affordability, access, delivery methods, time to completion, graduation rates and student success compel us to approach our work differently.

Additionally, as some circles question the value of a liberal arts education -- the essence of what it means to be educated -- our purpose beyond career preparation is at risk. This is the lens through which much policy is developed at the state and national level.
The expectation that the cost of higher education should be borne by society and the state has shifted to the burden falling ever more squarely on the shoulders of families and students.

What was once a public good now falls to the responsibility of individuals.

Ninety percent of our nation’s college graduates are alumni of institutions like ours, but our voice is frequently absent, with policymakers focusing on flagship universities and elite private institutions.
Given our role shouldn’t we have more of a presence in this conversation? More importantly, shouldn’t we lead by example, sharing the innovations we create, the creativity we employ and the commitment we demonstrate in our classrooms and laboratories every day to help solve the challenges we face in higher education?

In the coming weeks, our new strategic plan will take shape, and we’ll begin to put the pieces together from our various work groups, community forums and campus conversations.
This has been an inclusive, transparent effort to create the roadmap for our next decade of growth. I’m grateful for the interest that you have shown in this important work.

This plan will anchor us and it will guide us, it will focus our attention and our resources, it will hone and winnow our priorities, and it will ensure that we maintain that all-important student focus that has been the foundation of this institution since it’s beginning.
Our new strategic plan also will put us at the forefront of the national conversation about the challenges and opportunities that exist today within higher education.

More importantly, it will drive the conversations about how we must evolve to better serve our students, the region and the nation.

We will model what it means to elevate the communities we serve. We will embrace and champion methods of innovative teaching and learning. We will collaborate across disciplines, breaking-down silos that insulate and isolate us.
And we will achieve student outcomes in ways that transform the lives of all who call this place home. That means our faculty, our staff, our students, our alumni and the communities that surround us.

As we look forward, I want to outline several important steps we will take:

- to improve the student experience in a way that focuses on their success,
- to rethink how we gather as a community of scholars,
- to more closely engage with local industry and investors,
• to ensure we remain affordable and accessible to our families,
• and to ensure the experience we provide remains true to our ideals

First Year Village

First, we must be more intentional in our efforts to retain students from the first to second year, and to set them on a path to graduation in four years. We cannot afford to lose nearly 30% of our freshman class each year, and our students cannot afford to take on debt without earning a degree.
I have challenged our Student Affairs and Academic Affairs leadership to work together to create a robust first-year experience that will connect our students at the very start of their academic careers to their faculty and peers in an environment that encourages growth, bonds them to the institution and puts them on a path to success.

We will take the opportunity we have as we rebuild on the footprint that currently holds Barnes-Campbell and Bemis-Lawrence Halls to establish a First Year Village at the south end of our campus and create a true living-learning community for first-year students.
In many ways, this is a concept that returns us to the ideals on which higher education in this nation was built – the Oxbridge model -- connecting the time spent in the classroom and the 150 hours students spend outside the classroom with one another.

As we build these new residence halls, we will use the space in a way that enables deep faculty and peer engagement around important ideas that connect directly to student success and learning.
Classrooms, study rooms, social spaces and living spaces all will be combined, connecting students with similar interests, common goals and shared challenges together with faculty, staff and student mentors who will help them navigate through the first year and matriculate successfully to the second, setting them on a path to timely completion.

**WKU Commons**

Second, we can rethink how we combine learning and engagement with core services on our campus and do so in a creative, innovative way that benefits our entire campus community.
Our public-private partnership with Aramark provides us with a unique opportunity to transform and to rethink where and how we gather over meals as a campus community.

As we proceed with plans to renew dining services in the academic core at the top of the hill, instead of simply rebuilding the Garrett Conference Center, we will invest those funds into our campus libraries, creating an intellectual hub that invigorates engagement, stimulates learning and creates a sense of community for the entire WKU family.

And how better to do so than over a meal?
By creating the **WKU Commons** in a partnership between our libraries and our dining services, we can bring together important learning spaces to include collaboration areas; spaces where digital scholarship and data are used; and flexible teaching spaces that are adaptable and that enhance pedagogy and enable active learning and problem-based instruction. All of these can be combined in our libraries, in the heart of our campus, in a way that brings our community together in the space where they take meals.
Essentially, we will create a flexible and modern common space that serves as a dining destination for our entire community. It will be:

• a home for our commuter students to eat, work, study and collaborate;
• a destination for our faculty to engage in conversations with their students and peers;
• and a place for all of us to gather and to celebrate daily the collaborations central to academic life.
We will move away from thinking of the library as a book warehouse or materials repository and we will revitalize that space to become a place where ideas are created, shared and shaped.

While no one graduates from the library, no one graduates without the library.

**Innovation Campus**

Third, research is central to our mission at Western Kentucky University. But the type of inquiry we pursue, its purpose and its use, and our focus on practical discoveries is unique here.
We are not an R-One institution, and that should not be our aspiration. Our position as an applied research university – that puts ideas into action; that applies theory to practice; that has immediate value to our community; and that is essential to the undergraduate student experience.

That is a great comparative advantage for our institution and one we should embrace and celebrate.
Beyond more traditional grant-funded scholarship that will remain an important part of our research portfolio, we must connect more effectively our resources to the community in a way that leverages our intellectual capital to elevate the local and regional economy, to drive innovation and to fuel growth.

As part of this effort, we will redefine the work we do through our Research Foundation, our Office for Research and Creative Activity, and the Center for Research and Development by bringing them together into a single location.
What we begin today is the first step toward creating a true Innovation Campus, located just to our south - a place where our corporate partners co-locate, where student companies incubate and where new ideas are created.

The physical space exists now, but the concept is new. The WKU Innovation Campus will be a lighthouse that attracts the best and most innovative thinkers and brings them together around the table to create the next generation of companies that will grow here.
We have more to do to truly create an intellectual environment that will diversify our regional economy and help new companies form and spin off to create jobs that are more attractive to our graduates.

We must engage industry and local companies and work with local government and the state to attract, create and grow new industry. We want to create partnerships between them and our students, faculty and research labs - all with the purpose of ensuring that our students have an applied learning experience and that our graduates can stay here.
We can and we must do more to ensure that our university assets, including our human capital, are dedicated to driving the economy and growing the talent pipeline for the Commonwealth and for our region.

And that means all the communities we serve. Our campuses in Bowling Green, Elizabethtown, Glasgow and Owensboro should be magnets that attract investment and draw companies that want to be located near our faculty, staff and students.
I want to reiterate my strong commitment to our regional campuses and our partnerships with the communities where we are physically located. Please hear this – just because we have changed the structure under which our regional campuses will be administered does not lessen our role in providing access to four-year baccalaureate degree programs through our campuses in Elizabethtown, Glasgow and Owensboro. Nor does it mean that we are less committed to our role in growing those economies or developing local talent.
We will continue to have a strong presence through our regional campuses. But we also have an obligation to all of our citizens to create pathways for completion that include partnerships with our high schools and community colleges, and with business and industry.

We will need to think differently about instructional delivery because we will be challenged to find ways that cost less, serve more, and, that above all, directly connect our academic offerings with the needs of our students in the places where they live and where they work.
**WKU Opportunity Fund**

Developing talent is at the core of what we do. But we can’t do it without providing access. And let’s be honest, access is threatened as the cost of going to college rises.

Since its founding, this institution has been an institution of access and opportunity. From the time President Cherry opened the doors to now, Western Kentucky University has been an instrument of social mobility and economic improvement.
Dr. Cherry founded this university as a means to elevate the region and transform the lives of our students and their families, particularly for those who are the first in their families to go to college.

We must and we will remain committed to that core tenant of opportunity, and to do so, we must do all we can to be affordable and accessible to the students and families in our region. That means acknowledging the role we have played in increasing the price of a college education.
We must continue our press toward being more efficient and keeping our costs under control. We also must continue to advocate for appropriate state investments to cover our routine fixed-cost increases and to enable us to meet the needs of our students.

Even with all of those efforts, however, we still will need to do more. And, Philanthropy will play an ever more critical role in ensuring that -for those who are ready to come to college, ready to study with us, ready to join our Hilltopper family – that they will be able to benefit from this remarkable place - no matter their family’s economic condition.
During this past year I have met with countless alumni and friends who have made gifts to support WKU. For each and every one, the motivation behind their generosity is the desire to give back in some significant way – to pay it forward, to create a path for someone else.

Their stories – your stories – are inspiring. So many of you have shared how your experience here prepared you for a successful career and a good life, and now you want to do the same for a young person to give them the chance to create a better life for themselves and for their families.
Our tradition of funding opportunity for others began with our first president, Henry Hardin Cherry. In 1923 President Cherry received a one hundred dollar gift from a member of the faculty for the purpose of providing financial assistance to deserving students, and with that first one hundred dollars he established the College Heights Foundation.

Today the College Heights Foundation administers more than twelve hundred scholarship funds and has a total endowment of more than seventy-five million dollars.
To continue in that tradition of aiding deserving students in need, I’m excited to announce the creation of the WKU Opportunity Fund.

The WKU Opportunity Fund will be a focused effort to raise $50 million to support WKU students.

Beyond tuition support, the WKU Opportunity Fund will enable our students to access educational experiences that otherwise might remain out of their reach.
It will help our most needy students attend conferences, study abroad, pursue national internships, and present papers. It will unlock those crucial and meaningful experiences designed to enhance classroom learning, that often seem unattainable to students struggling just to make ends meet.

In her position as Director of Principal Gifts and Special Projects, Kacy serves as a key member of the university’s development and major gifts team. In that role - and as an important component of her work as our university’s first lady - I have asked Kacy to take the lead on this effort for WKU.
Through the WKU Opportunity Fund, our philanthropic partners - our investors, our alumni, our friends - will be crucial in our efforts to ensure that financial need is not an obstacle to earning a degree at WKU or participating in the complete WKU experience.

**The WKU Experience**

Finally, I want to talk about that experience. It is what makes us special, and it differentiates us.

Our campus is and should be a place where all are welcomed, included, supported and cared for.
Diversity of background, of thought and of place...all connected through this WKU Experience.

Inside and outside of our offices and our classrooms, I want all of us to see the value in being with people who see the world differently than we do - whose culture, whose life experience and whose understanding of things is different from our own. There is great value in recognizing that we all don’t understand things in the same way and that we can benefit from trying to understand one other.
And as our students depart the hill to begin their careers, we must ensure they are prepared to collaborate, cooperate and connect with people unlike themselves. The WKU Experience must intentionally create intellectual discomfort and challenge our students to broaden their worldviews. We want to encourage them to think broadly and to be a part of something bigger and less familiar. In our sometimes caustic and difficult world, I hope they will learn that people can disagree without being hurtful; that they can challenge one another without causing harm; and that they can find themselves on opposite sides of an argument and still remain friends.
However, I also hope our students leave WKU with a set of core values and beliefs that are not negotiable; that there is right and wrong; good and bad; acceptable and unacceptable. And to know that those values will be challenged. But also to know that our world needs people in those situations who will make the ethical choice, will do the right thing, and will not compromise.

Finally, I want each of you to recognize that the WKU Experience is about much more than readying students for a career. Appreciate that what we do together is transformational.
Many of you only need to reflect on your own time here as a reminder that everything we do prepares our students for a lifetime of success – and that this about so much more than simply preparing them for a job.

Yes, we must ensure our graduates leave us with the skills to be successful in the workplace. However, beyond the technical skills needed to fill today’s jobs, we must impart them with an intellectual nimbleness and a facility with ideas, so they are prepared for jobs that haven’t been thought of today.
We must give them the ability to reason and solve problems, to communicate, to speak persuasively, to work effectively in groups – these are the skills that lead to lifelong success.

And, we must cultivate a love of learning among our graduates – an inquisitiveness and an unending curiosity. All of this in the service of not only preparing them to make good livings, but also to make good lives - for themselves, their families and the communities where they live.
Good Living, Good Life

So at the heart of what we do and why we each chose to invest our lives in support of higher education, is our shared desire to change lives. Whether you do that through groundbreaking research, by teaching in a classroom, or in one of the hundreds of support services that get our students in the door and carry them through to graduation and beyond - we all are part of something much larger than ourselves.
It’s a fantastic journey. Sometimes the circumstances of the day may make the path seem more like an uphill climb. But then, we are on a hill, aren’t we?

During these times I would offer this – reflect upon the 112-year history of this university. Recognize the thousands of lives that have been transformed because of the great work we do here. Some of those lives are your own, our perhaps your parents’, or maybe your children’s.
Dr. Cherry laid the foundation during a time that presented great challenges, and yet we have persevered and risen to heights that I feel sure were well beyond his wildest dreams for his beloved Western.

What we do as community – as a family – will forever make a difference. Thank you for choosing this path. Thank you for climbing this hill. And thank you for allowing me to climb with you.