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Good morning WKU Family.

The past five months, which feel like five days and five years at the same time.

The isolation; the separation; the uncertainty; have brought us here – to our restart.

We have arrived at this moment – through our efforts; our hard work; our sacrifice; our grit.

Today is a reminder of what is important and what is possible – a day of hopefulness in the face of enormous challenges.

Together, we worked to create a way for us to coexist with this threat and to continue to serve our institutional purpose.

And it is a reaffirmation that our mission – that which ties us together – is more crucial now than ever before.

Educating students; creating knowledge; ensuring that opportunity should be available to every young person, no matter what the economic condition into which they are born;

That our purpose is to alter the trajectory of our students' lives; that higher education transforms.

And that even when faced with enormous obstacles – it is within each of us and in the fabric of our community – to aspire, to persist and to persevere.

The aspirations, persistence and perseverance that mark much of the history of our university.

So first today, let me say thank you.

Thank you for your remarkable response to arguably the largest challenge in WKU's history.

Our actions were swift and aggressive in March when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization.

And while we demonstrated our capacity to move to remote instruction, our shift confirmed the importance of face-to-face instruction for most of our Hilltopper students and the value they place on the total college experience you create – engaging individually with faculty and staff; working together with their colleagues; participating in co-curricular activities. So, we began preparing a way for them to join us this fall.

A parallel planning effort to restart – because we knew then the enormous amount of work ahead, the essential conversations, the careful research and the critical decisions before us.

Thank you, to the faculty and staff who served on our restart committees, who developed the comprehensive plans and strategies to guide us.

Prioritizing the health and safety of our students, faculty and staff, you rethought and reshaped every facet of our operations. I know the many extra hours this work required throughout the summer. We appreciate all you've done to move WKU forward and get us where we are today.

Second, even in the midst of everything we've faced for the past five months, we have continued to pursue aggressively the lofty goals we set for ourselves in *Climbing to Greater Heights*, our strategic plan. I am pleased to share with you several of our successes from the past year.

Last fall, we restructured the existing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team, bringing together leaders from our shared governance groups, Academic Affairs, Enrollment and Student Experience and the Alumni Association, with Co-Chief Diversity Officers Michael Crowe and Professor Molly Kerby at the helm. We already are seeing the benefits of this reorganized team.

Each year, the Council on Postsecondary Education evaluates state universities on the progress of their DEI efforts. In our latest evaluation (2018-19), WKU achieved the second highest score, among Kentucky's public universities.

While I am pleased with the progress we have made, we recognize we have more work to do.

We remain committed to our historical mission of providing access and opportunity to those within our region and beyond. Our efforts this past year produced tremendous gains in our recruitment, retention and graduation rates.

In the area of recruitment, this fall, we celebrate the largest one-year increase in the size of our incoming class than at any time during the past three decades, four hundred and forty-three (443) students larger than last year's class. This talented group brings with it the highest high school GPA in WKU's history – with a grade point average of three point four five (3.45).

We credit much of this increase to our new scholarship program. Nearly eighty-four percent (84%) of this year's first-year students were eligible for scholarship aid, compared to thirty-nine percent (39%) last year, with an additional five point two million dollars (\$5.2 million) in scholarship funding available – a twenty percent (20%) increase. Our new program increases access by decreasing cost and rewarding students' work during high school.

Now, on to retention.

Last fall's one year retention rate of seventy-two point nine percent (72.9%) was the highest since fall 2013 (73.1%). As were the rates for underrepresented minority students, at fifty-nine point five percent (59.5%).

And while our overall fall to spring retention rate was flat our URM retention rate jumped from 85.5% (fall 2018 to spring 2019) to 89.5% (fall 2019 to spring 2020).

Our preliminary fall retention data also show promising results, up by more than three percent from this time a year ago (77.1% compared to 73.6% at this same time last year for fall 2018 to fall 2019 retention). Even removing from the calculation students granted pandemic exceptions from dismissal, overall retention still is up one percent and URM retention by over 5 percent.

And finally, our graduation rates.

Beyond these remarkable recruitment and retention successes, our six-year graduation rate rose to fifty-four point nine percent (54.9%) – the highest six-year graduation rate ever at WKU! We also achieved the highest URM and low-income six-year graduation rates in eight years and awarded over three thousand bachelor's degrees, more than we have awarded in any previous academic year. We also awarded the largest number of degrees to URM undergraduates and highest total of STEM plus health degrees since we began tracking those numbers in 2011.

We continue to demonstrate the importance of coupling access with success, and that access without success is access to nothing.

We implemented targeted interventions making it easier and more streamlined for students to get the answers and assistance they need with our centralized advising program.

We supported students who needed a little extra assistance to be successful with our Summer Scholars program. Our commitment to pre-enrollment orientation programs and the development of targeted living-learning communities has led to an increase in both enrollment and retention of underrepresented minority and low-income students.

And the tremendous work of the ISEC Academy continues to assist students of color with mentorship and a supportive community.

Our efforts to ensure resources are available to those students who otherwise could not afford to attend WKU also are paying great dividends.

We continued to move our financial support down the need curve, providing additional aid to those students with the most need. And the WKU Opportunity Fund, a fundraising effort to support our students, led by our First Lady, Kacy Caboni, continues its exponential growth eclipsing thirty-nine million dollars raised (\$39 million) in just three years (since June 1, 2017) with one hundred and fourteen (114) new endowed scholarship funds (since June 1, 2017). Eleven point six million dollars (\$11.6M) were added this past fiscal year.

And, even in the unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves, we continue to take actions that are in the best interest of our students, demonstrated by our intentional decisions to not increase tuition for the 2020-21 academic year, to waive the (\$150 per credit hour) distance learning course fee for one year and to reduce tuition for Kentucky teachers taking graduate courses required for continuing education (from \$415 per credit hour to \$350 making it the third lowest among our peer institutions).

We must continue balancing the needs of our students and their families and the needs of the institution, remaining mindful not to place the financial burden caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on our students or their families.

Third, even though we are working quite differently this year, we still must work toward the shared goals outlined in our strategic plan.

This summer, we reaffirmed our commitment to do more to ensure we live in a world that is fair, just and equitable for all. Led by our DEI group, this year we will initiate the One WKU Campaign and Academy and will implement implicit bias trainings, a state-wide cultural competency certificate program, new hiring policies, new partnerships between WKU Police and other local law enforcement agencies, and deliberative dialogues on our campus.

We will continue to work together and stand up for fairness and justice for every person, recognizing systemic change cannot be accomplished by one person or by one committee. Our efforts to make our campus One WKU will be achieved only if each of us accepts our own role in advancing equity and inclusion at WKU and beyond.

This also will require us to look inward. The symbols we select and the names we use as a university should communicate our values, honor individuals for exemplary service and recognize philanthropic investment.

In many ways, the names we carve into our buildings and attach to our academic units should define for members of our community the best of what we have been, what we are and what we aspire to be.

To this end, I have established a taskforce to conduct a thorough examination of the history of WKU's namings; explore options for how we might address those that might be problematic; and make recommendations for university leadership to consider.

This will require difficult and challenging conversations, but the effort is vital as we consider the ways in which we welcome and support every member of the WKU community.

WKU will continue to elevate our communities by deepening and broadening our collaboration with economic development organizations across the region, and our Innovation Campus on Nashville Road plays a critical role in that work.

This summer, Governor Beshear announced the Bowling Green Central Region Innovation and Commercialization Center will be located on the WKU Innovation Campus, joining the statewide RISE program as a new node in its network.

Also last month, the Bowling Green Chamber of Commerce announced the hiring of two business coaches to support the Small Business Development Center, housed within our Small Business Accelerator. Both moves will further enhance WKU's Innovation Campus.

In the wake of the pandemic, it will be more important than ever that the university works to improve the entrepreneurial support ecosystem in our region.

We must do our part to accelerate the growth of area companies, provide the entrepreneurial connective tissue between Nashville and Louisville on the I-65 corridor and create opportunities and jobs for South Central Kentucky.

I am pleased to announce this morning a new effort to support our sponsored research activities at WKU.

Our Trans-institutional Research Support Program will enhance our capacity to pursue large federal sponsored research grants.

Funded through our strategic investment fund, this competitive award program will provide three years of annual financial support of up to fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000).

Our Office of Research & Creative Activity will select three to five WKU projects that span two or more academic colleges for initial investment.

This program will position us to pursue targeted areas of funding and elevate further WKU's academic reputation in preexisting areas of strength.

While we have had an enormously successful year recruiting and our first-year enrollment is up significantly, we must continue our work to position WKU as an institution of choice within an immensely competitive landscape.

This year, we will redouble our efforts to grow our freshman class.

Paying close attention to COVID-19 related shifts in our marketplace, we will continue to innovate in our scholarship programs and admission criteria, to ensure WKU remains relevant, attractive and affordable to prospective students in the region and beyond.

Finally, this year will see the completion of The WKU Commons at Helm Library and continued construction of The First-Year Village, which will welcome its first residents next fall.

These new developments aren't about new spaces, but instead will provide opportunities to expand upon our greatest competitive advantage – the individualized attention and supportive relationships our students have with faculty.

We know academic integration is key to increasing retention, especially of students in their first year with us.

Now imagine as a freshman, instead of entering WKU with 3500 other students, you begin with 23 peers; living in the same space; with others who share your academic interests; who have at least one common course scheduled with you; with a faculty mentor in your chosen discipline; an upper-class peer advisor who lives in the room down the hall, also enrolled in your area of study; working on projects together; connecting what happens in the classroom to the other 150 hours students spend outside of class.

The First-Year Village is much more than new facilities – this is a complete reimagining of the first year of college for our students – creating an Oxbridge type residential environment -- placing faculty and academics at the center of that experience.

It will be an exciting year as we work to welcome our first new class who will benefit from our transformation.

To conclude today, I would like to announce the recipient of the 2020 Spirit of WKU award. This honor recognizes an individual who represents enthusiasm for WKU, loyalty to the institution and principles of the WKU experience and its motto “The Spirit Makes the Master.”

Our 2020 recipient discovered the WKU spirit early in life. Descending from a long line of WKU graduates, he knew as a child what it meant to be a Hilltopper and to possess that special feeling or “spirit.”

His accomplishments are built not only on a strong spirit, but also on hard work, determination, and an ever-present commitment to make a meaningful difference in higher education.

As Executive Director of the WKU Alumni Association, he successfully secured significant gifts to build the Augenstein Alumni Center and was closely involved in ensuring that the design of the center appropriately captured WKU’s history and traditions.

Today the AAC provides space for both visiting alumni and community groups to hold meetings, presentations, social events and educational programs.

As President of the College Heights Foundation, he led record-breaking fundraising efforts with more than sixty million dollars (\$60 million) cash flow during the past seven years.

His work has made an incredible difference in assisting and encouraging hundreds of deserving WKU students.

Those who work closely with him would tell you that his WKU spirit is infectious and that he is a true champion for student success with a tireless commitment for serving WKU.

So, with that, please join me in congratulating the 2020 Spirit of WKU award winner, Donald Smith!

Donald, normally the room would be filled with applause.

Please know that we are all cheering for you from across our campuses this morning.

I look forward to personally visiting with you this afternoon to present this well-deserved award.

The past five months have been difficult. Each of us experiencing our shared upheaval in unique and personal ways.

Our collective and our individual losses; as humans, we are hardwired to seek out others for exchange; for communication; for support; and for solace.

Yet, we have been forced to engage with one another through screens and software; isolated and sometimes alone;

Experiencing the world by scrolling and subjecting ourselves to algorithms; designed to separate; to sow division; to create the other; to amplify and reward the caustic and the uninformed.

As we begin to reconvene in person, (many of us for the first time in months); and as we work together to create community in new ways;

A gentle reminder that each of us wants the best for our university; for each other; for our families; for ourselves.

And given all we each have been through, please strive to treat one another with extra measures of patience, kindness, and grace.

As we guide our students through what is hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime year, let's continue to exemplify the Spirit for which our institution is known and demonstrate what it means to be a part of the Hilltopper Family.

Thank you for everything you have done to be ready for this moment. Here's to a terrific year on the Hill.

Wear a mask, stay six feet apart, wash your hands and Go Tops!