

The MORGANTOWN News

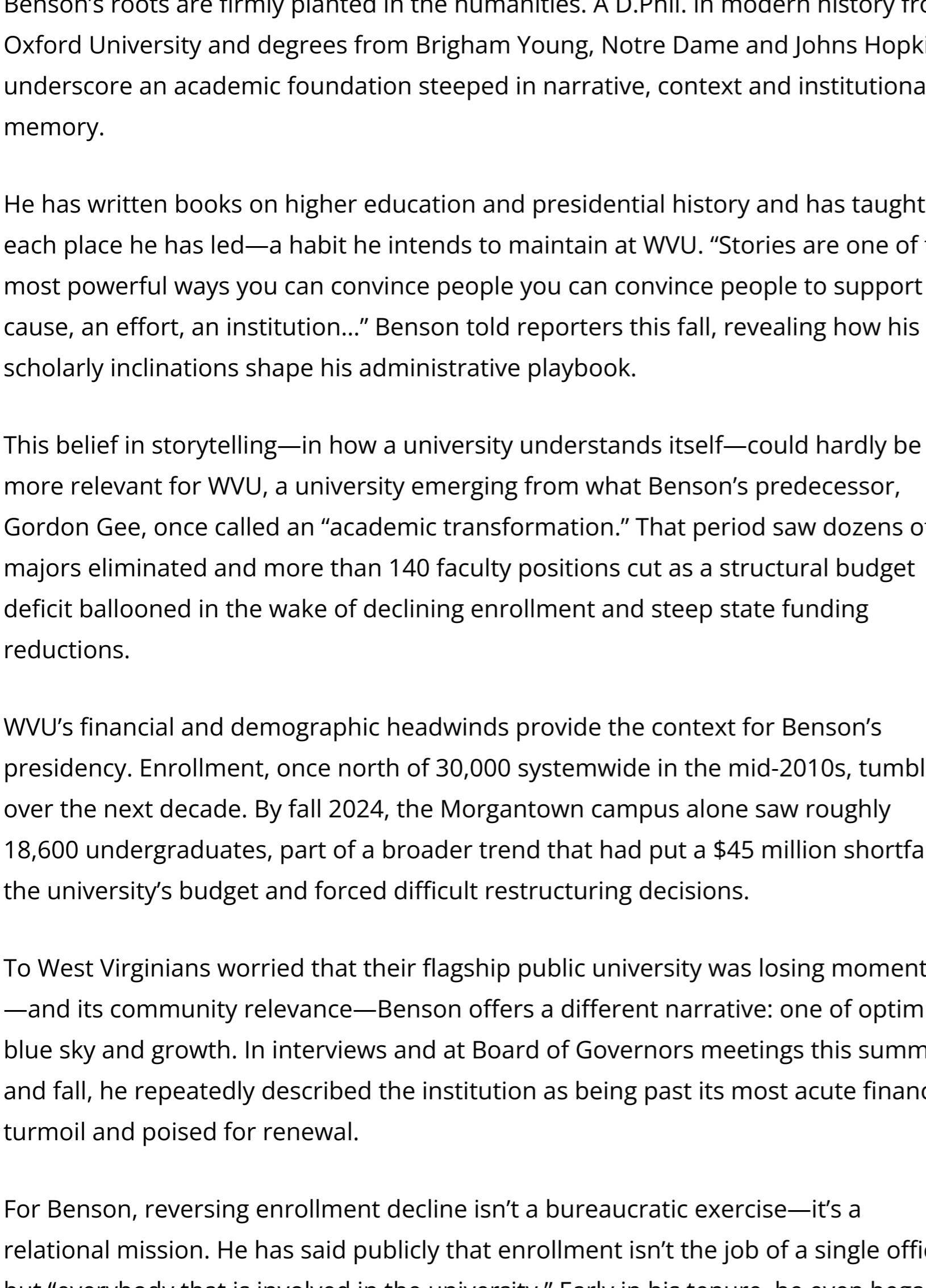
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TOP STORY

WVU President Michael T. Benson named WV News Educator of the Year

by Chase Hughart STAFF WRITER 7 hrs ago 0 4 min to read



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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — Michael T. Benson joined the Mountaineer family this year as the university's 27th president.

He has been named Educator of the Year by WV News, an honor recognizing his leadership in higher education and his efforts to advance student success and institutional growth at West Virginia University.

Since the beginning of his tenure, WVU has seen higher retention rates, enrollment and graduation rates, and he has marked himself not just as another college president, but as the leader tasked with reinvigorating a flagship institution at a crossroads.

His journey to Morgantown—from the sun-drenched beaches of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and the red rock horizons of Utah to the rolling Appalachian hills of West Virginia—is as eclectic as it is emblematic of his career: rooted in scholarship, seasoned by administrative ambition, and driven by an unshakable belief in higher education as a lever for individual and regional transformation.

At 60 years old, Benson brings to WVU nearly three decades in higher education, with presidencies at four universities before ever arriving in Morgantown: Snow College, Southern Utah University, Eastern Kentucky University and, most recently, Coastal Carolina University.

His résumé reads like a tour of American public education's varied terrain—from rural community colleges of 3,000 students to midsize regional universities grappling with enrollment growth and financial sustainability.

Unlike many university presidents whose origins are in the sciences or engineering, Benson's roots are firmly planted in the humanities. A D.Phil. in modern history from Oxford University and degrees from Brigham Young, Notre Dame and Johns Hopkins underscore an academic foundation steeped in narrative, context and institutional memory.

He has written books on higher education and presidential history and has taught in each place he has led—a habit he intends to maintain at WVU. "Stories are one of the most powerful ways you can convince people you can convince people to support a cause, an effort, an institution..." Benson told reporters this fall, revealing how his scholarly inclinations shape his administrative playbook.

This belief in storytelling—in how a university understands itself—could hardly be more relevant for WVU, a university emerging from what Benson's predecessor, Gordon Gee, once called an "academic transformation." That period saw dozens of majors eliminated and more than 140 faculty positions cut as a structural budget deficit ballooned in the wake of declining enrollment and steep state funding reductions.

WVU's financial and demographic headwinds provide the context for Benson's presidency. Enrollment, once north of 30,000 systemwide in the mid-2010s, tumbled over the next decade. By fall 2024, the Morgantown campus alone saw roughly 18,600 undergraduates, part of a broader trend that had put a \$45 million shortfall in the university's budget and forced difficult restructuring decisions.

To West Virginians worried that their flagship public university was losing momentum—and its community relevance—Benson offers a different narrative: one of optimism, blue sky and growth. In interviews and at Board of Governors meetings this summer and fall, he repeatedly described the institution as being past its most acute financial turmoil and poised for renewal.

For Benson, reversing enrollment decline isn't a bureaucratic exercise—it's a relational mission. He has said publicly that enrollment isn't the job of a single office, but "everybody that is involved in the university." Early in his tenure, he even began dialing prospective students himself to underscore that message. "We're going to do that on a regular basis," he said. Enrollment, retention and graduation are collective responsibilities, he insists—from faculty to alumni.

This hands-on philosophy echoes his coaching style at Coastal Carolina, where under his leadership the university recorded its largest enrollment and highest retention rates in history—milestones that preceded his move to West Virginia.

One of Benson's signature themes has been tuition affordability, even amid broader economic pressures. WVU held tuition flat for the upcoming year and unveiled new financial aid programs aimed at making a WVU education more accessible to West Virginians. "The last thing I want to do is price anybody out of a West Virginia education that wants one," he said, framing his own story—where his grandfather was the first in his family to attend college—as the touchstone for his policies.

His rhetoric taps into a core public mission: serve West Virginia's students not just academically, but economically and socially. For a state whose population trends lag national averages, such commitments carry symbolic as well as practical weight.

While WVU continues to navigate budget realities, Benson's gaze turns also to development. He has set an ambitious fundraising goal of \$300 million annually—a figure that, if sustained, would help make up for shrinking federal and state support.

WVU is already on track to approach that target this fiscal year with over \$280 million raised. Fundraising prowess has been a consistent part of Benson's career. At Snow College, he raised more private money in five years than the institution had in the previous century; at Coastal Carolina, he secured the largest gift in school history, a \$10 million endowment supporting new academic facilities.

One early hallmark of Benson's WVU presidency was the "Welcome Home Tour," an expansive roadshow across all 55 West Virginia counties. In just a few weeks, he logged visits to nearly half the state—from Wheeling to Bridgeport, Jackson's Mill to Grafton—meeting students, alumni, local officials and hospital leaders. In each stop, he emphasized that WVU's mission transcends Morgantown. The university's health system—25 hospitals and five specialty institutes across multiple states—reflects that reach.

In every reception and community gathering, Benson's message is consistent: WVU exists with the state, not merely in it. Whether touring West Virginia Independence Hall in Wheeling or swapping stories with small-town officials about educational access, his leadership seeks to bridge the campus and the commonwealth.

If Benson's tenure to date is any indication, his presidency will be defined by a dual commitment: anchoring WVU in its proud traditions while writing new chapters for its future. He treasures the institution's R1 research status, Division I athletics and its critical role in state health care—but insists on evolving WVU to meet contemporary challenges. Artificial intelligence, he says, is not a threat but a tool to be integrated across learning environments; storytelling and outreach aren't extracurricular, they're strategic imperatives.

For a university still healing from difficult choices and financial strain, Benson's arrival offers a reset: a historian at the helm, telling West Virginia's flagship story not as a chronicle of decline, but as a narrative of resolve, renewal and possibility.

PREV

5 stars (0 Ratings)

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