

https://www.wvnews.com/news/wvnews/focused-mission-west-virginia-university-remains-committed-to-quality-higher-education-in-helping-drive-economic/article_84518ac4-e212-11ee-a56f-5bae2c00f97d.html

Focused mission: West Virginia University remains committed to quality higher education in helping drive economic, population growth

by John G. Miller Executive Editor

Mar 29, 2024

1 of 8



A glimpse at December graduation ceremonies at WVU.

Alyssa Reeves

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (WV News) — West Virginia University President Dr. E. Gordon Gee believes that the state's largest institution of higher education is better positioned now to fulfill its responsibility to not only its students, but the people of the Mountain State.

While the academic transformation — which saw the main campus, as well as its satellites, realign fields of study and personnel — continues, Gee is confident the university is moving forward in better service to its mission.

"We made a decision that we needed to make," Gee said. "We needed to focus on changing the arc of the institution, to make sure we were meeting our obligations to the people. It was not without controversy, but the net result is that I think we're a better institution now than we were several years ago — and even then we were a damn good institution.

"Very few institutions in this country continue to spur opportunities to make a difference in people's lives like we have, and very few have done a better job than we've done."

"It's just not hyperbole, (the term) mission. Take, for example, our scientists. We have the leading brain center in the country, in the world, and the work Dr. (Ali) Rezaei's team has done is amazing across the scope, but the thing about it is, it is focusing on issues that are so important to every West Virginian: Alzheimer's, obesity, drug issues, a variety of other things.

"Yes, it's world-class research that they're doing to the brain. But it matters here as well," he said.

Gee went on to point out the teamwork of WVU and its health-care offshoot, WVU Medicine, especially in terms of advancing nursing education opportunities by opening training facilities in several areas of the Mountain State.

"We're really trying to make sure that we are ... meeting the health-care needs of the state by expanding our nursing programs.

"The university is very balanced between providing a high quality education and a very affordable cost to the people of West Virginia," Gee said. "But at the same time, it's an institution that is and remains the economic engine of the state by creating jobs and opportunity. We are the largest employer in the state.

“So I think that balance between high quality education and economic growth, serving both well, is a point of real pride for us.”

Gee, and James Hoyer, vice president for economic innovation, both discussed the university’s role in spurring development efforts. The university plays a key role, either as a major player or as an available resource in efforts to spur economic development.

When Mylan/Viatris left Morgantown, leaving its huge facility to the university, WVU and state officials looked at ways to best utilize the property to help replace those lost jobs, as well as provide new ones.

The WVU Innovation Corporation took over the massive facility and is working to fill spaces with a variety of companies.

Hope Gas opened its new headquarters at the location, with 100 employees and the plan to hire at least 100 more. Other businesses have moved in, or will move there in the future.

“We’ve converted it into a major economic development source, with Hope Gas, a number of other smaller companies, and we have LG coming. It’s a South Korean company that really wanted to focus on digital health — and we’re one of the leading areas and institutions in terms of digital health.”

West Virginia University also is a driving force in the WV Ascend program, as well as its growing number of auxiliary programs such as the recently announced Teachers Ascend program.

Aimed at recruiting people to the Mountain State, the original Ascend program saw great success by offering financial stipends, educational training and additional perks to bring in those able to remote work. Now programs are aimed at bringing in new teachers, as well as retaining recent college graduates.

"We've been working with Secretary of Commerce James Bailey," Hoyer said. "At any given point, we may have as many as 29,000 unfilled positions in the state of West Virginia. We've got to be honed in on that talent, both in attraction and retention."

Hoyer said that besides the Ascend programs, WVU, as well as partner universities like Marshall, are working hard to give students as many experiential opportunities as possible through internships.

"Getting these students into paid internships that offer opportunities with these companies that have these vacancies in order to show our young people that there are opportunities in West Virginia," Hoyer said. "To give these companies the opportunity to bring them early, to train them and make them a part of their corporate families."

Both Hoyer and Gee spoke of the importance of all of West Virginia working together to promote the state and stem the “brain drain” of more young people leaving the Mountain State than staying.

One of those efforts combines the talents and innovation of both WVU and Marshall in their “Universities United” effort, which works to promote the Mountain State and the many opportunities that exists through programs like Ascend, Choose West Virginia, and others that both WVU and Marshall, as well as other state institutions support.

“For the first time in 50 years, the population of West Virginia moved this year, and I think it is fabulous keeping younger people here growing business and industry,” Gee said.

Gee said recruiting people back to West Virginia can be done because most people love what the state offers.

“But they have created a diaspora out there all over the country, all over the world. Not because they want to leave West Virginia but because West Virginia left them. By that I mean we just didn’t create the jobs and opportunity, and in this modern society with these young people, they want to be in a place of technological advancement, that they can grow their own ideas, that they can be

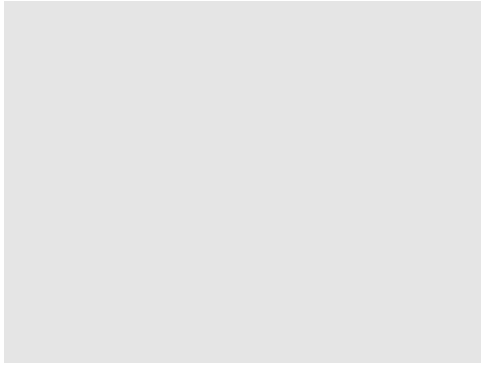
entrepreneurial, that they can have access to whitewater rafting and a variety of other things. We are trying to make all that happen.

“So we are also starting another program that was called First Ascend. Marshall and West Virginia have joined forces in what we call University United to focus on students who are here, wherever they come from in the world, to keep them here in West Virginia. And to make sure that they stay here, to grow their lives and their families here.”

Gee said that while alumni and supporters can be strong in their support of individual institutions, the power of Marshall and WVU working together can move the Mountain State forward.

“Brad (D. Smith, Marshall’s president) and I are great friends. And we made a commitment that if we were going to be rivals it would only be on Saturday afternoons, not for the other 6 1/2 days of the week.

“With ‘Universities United’ we fly under that flag. When we go to the Legislature, we present together and support each other’s endeavors. And it’s been very powerful, because in a small state, the last thing you [want to] have is unbridled rivalries. We can have contests, but not be combative. And we’ve been very successful and it’s made a real difference.”



Gee

ellis gregory michael