

UW Budget Debate "A self-defeating liberal impulse"

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MADISON - Wisconsin deserves far more than a debate over whether investment in our state university system should be cut by \$300 million as the governor wishes or \$250 million as legislative leaders desire. The debate should be about how to make education as affordable for future generations as past generations made it for us. Lawmakers here and across the country should be trying to figure out how to reach the goal of [tuition-free college](#) . The future of the American Dream depends on it.

Something predictable happens when it is suggested that the promise of free public education for all children be extended all the way through college. Hardcore right-wingers balk at the idea of paying for anything that helps someone else. But something else happens too. Liberals instinctively call for [means testing](#) , arguing that only those who could not otherwise afford to pay for schooling should get society's assistance.

This liberal impulse is understandable. It is also self-defeating. It ends up undermining the very kind of public investments liberals think are so critically important. It does so by stigmatizing public investments and sowing the seeds of resentment and hostility toward the beneficiaries.

Means testing inevitably pits those who qualify against those who don't. It is no accident that the government programs that have been most successful and enduring – like Social Security – are not means tested. Everyone pays, everyone benefits.

Means tests also are prone to creating poverty traps. You have to be needy enough to qualify for a public benefit, and you have to stay needy enough to keep receiving it.

In order to have a just and decent society, we need to be there for each other. And we need our government to reflect that spirit of interdependence. Arriving there depends on us being smart enough to resist impulses like means testing that make government programs vulnerable to divide-and-conquer tactics. To the greatest extent humanly possible, what government does needs to be done for the whole of society. Everyone pays, everyone benefits.