

Governor's Higher Education Budget Cuts Bad for Wisconsin's Future

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 03 February 2015 14:24 -

<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/uwgb-student-s5.jpg>



This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the Governor's proposed cuts to the University of Wisconsin. These cuts, if passed by the Legislature, will have a significant negative impact on staff, faculty and ultimately students.

MADISON - "I love college, Mom," my son told me. "There is nowhere else I can hear a conversation in a different language every day."

My son got me thinking about the challenges our students face – competing in a global marketplace, changes in the economy, changes in technology. College has never been so important. Keeping colleges up-to-date costs money.

Getting one's children through college is harder. Finding the right mix of rigor and value is a real challenge for families.

Wisconsin universities stand out for value. Over and over again UW-Eau Claire and UW-La Crosse rank as two of the best values in the Midwest.

UW-Madison is a world-class research institution. The UW comprehensive campuses statewide are the cultural heart of communities large and small; where would River Falls or Menomonie be without the UW at the center of the city?

A new proposal from the Governor would make deep cuts to the UW, dropping state support – in actual dollars - to below 1997-98 funding levels. The Governor also proposed loosening public control over the UW. The twin actions of cutting funds & cutting the university loose from the state are a recipe for disaster.

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The last foray into cutting loose a part of state government – the Department of Commerce – didn't work well for the Governor. Once a big part of state government is cut loose, its central focus is not on serving the public interest.

The constituency for keeping the university system apart from the state will be so strong it will not be possible to bring the system back. And those constituencies fighting to keep the system separate have private not public goals. Say "good-bye" to the Wisconsin Idea.

The rationale for cutting UW support is to make the system more efficient. Sure, efficiencies are important. But the reduction proposed by the Governor - \$300 million over two years – will cut one quarter of current state spending.

And this year's state funding for the UW is already lower than six years ago.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Wisconsin is one of only six states that continued to cut higher education funding per student by more than 2% following the Great Recession (adjusted for inflation and using data from Fiscal Year (FY) 2013-14).

Over the last decade and a half, state support for the UW has been modest at best. For example, FY 2012 funding fell below FY 2001. Increasing education costs were shifted to steady increases in tuition. Reacting to parents' concerns, the Governor and Legislative Leaders froze tuition. Other states froze tuition - but many also increased state funding. Not so for Wisconsin.

"Teach more classes," the Governor said. But teaching more classes and "becoming more efficient" won't absorb the proposed cuts. Cutting one out of every four state dollars is cutting too deep. As a consequence professors will leave Wisconsin.

The best and brightest on our campuses are not tied to Wisconsin. They are tied to their discipline – be it mathematics or biology. A local businessman once told me, "All jobs are mobile." Professors are definitely mobile.

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Once the best and brightest begin to leave (I've been told this is already happening) morale plummets. As more professors find new academic homes they take with them not only their expertise and international reputation - they take their federal grants.

Without federal grants UW loses another big source of funds. (Federal money, including student loans now account for more than a quarter of the UW budget.)

The Governor's proposed actions place the UW in a downward spiral: less state money, a lock on rising tuition, loss of top faculty, declining federal money, loss of the world-class reputation. The consequences of disinvestment will take generations to recover.

Public universities are just that – “public”. Public universities are supported by the people and serve the people. Wisconsin has steadily eroded state support for the UW. We should be doing just the opposite.

Our public universities are a catalyst for the creative culture that builds the great places in which we all want to live, work, play and start a new business. They are well worth our investment.