

*Charting A New Course For the UW System*  
Final Report – Executive Summary

Since its inception as a state, Wisconsin has supported public higher education for its citizens. One of the first acts of the new state government was the establishment of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, a land grant institution.<sup>i</sup> Since that time, the university has evolved into a system comprised of twenty-six campuses and a state-wide UW Extension.<sup>ii</sup> This support has survived wars, the Great Depression and other economic down turns, and has resulted in one of the finest systems of higher education in the world.

This report marks the conclusion of a year-long study by the Board of Regents in collaboration with students, faculty and staff, campus and system administrators and others. To address the needs of Wisconsin's future we first looked inward for additional efficiencies and revenue streams, as well as for ways that new technologies can enhance our service to students and the state. We also looked at ways that legislative changes can better enable us to fulfill those missions.

The study was motivated by a decade of static or declining state support for the University of Wisconsin System, culminating with the largest base budget cut in its history in the 2003-2005 biennium. Even though the university was authorized to raise tuition significantly to partially replace state aid, the net effect was still a \$100 million shortfall, without a conscious, deliberate decision by Wisconsinites to disinvest in their university. Because enrollment targets were not rolled back beforehand, students were forced to pay higher tuition, to help fund their own financial aids, and still face larger class sizes, fewer course offerings and sections, and longer time to degree. In short, quality was compromised. A policy decision has been made de facto as Wisconsin has shifted from a low tuition, low aid philosophy to a medium tuition, uncertain aid reality.

The one overarching fact that emerges from this study is that there are no substitutes for adequate, stable state support for our instructional mission. Because most of our state support goes for instructional salaries, the only way the university can maintain current levels of enrollment opportunities for Wisconsin citizens is with adequate state support per student. Additional cuts to our base budget can only result in fewer instructors and reduced enrollments – there can be no other outcomes.

General themes that arose from the study include continuing access to higher education at an affordable cost, maintaining the quality of the educational

experience and providing service to the state by educating its citizenry, helping to solve its problems and stimulating its economic development. Because the university has proven itself to be an invaluable asset for the state in these areas, Wisconsin will make a grave error if it does not reverse the trend of diminishing support for its university system as we enter the new global information economy.

Several key findings of our year-long study stand out:

- There simply are no alternative revenue streams that can take the place of adequate, stable state support for our instructional missions.
- Sustainable, state-supported financial aid for students is necessary if we are to avoid pricing lower income Wisconsin families out of higher education.
- The Board of Regents needs the authority to set competitive salaries, restore faculty numbers for better instructional quality and manage unclassified positions if we are to attract and retain the esteemed faculty and administrators necessary for quality higher education.
- Increased funding for diversity initiatives is required if we are to improve that aspect of the university experience and more closely mirror the state's citizenry.
- A significant investment in information technology can transform higher education in Wisconsin through the use of distance, on-line, and other learning modalities, and by connecting us to research communities worldwide.
- Significant savings can help pay for some of these necessary university investments if we can change the way we do business in such areas as capital projects, procurement and risk management.

These topics and others are examined in more detail in the following report. The fact is if Wisconsin can find ways to reinvest in its university system and effect necessary management flexibilities outlined above, the system can reinvent itself and *Chart A New Course For Wisconsin* into the new global information economy. Conversely, if it fails to do so Wisconsin will sacrifice its world-class university system as a critical tool to reverse a course of economic and societal decline. In a recent article, UW-Madison Chancellor John D. Wiley writes:

*“I want to send a wake-up call to the citizens of Wisconsin regarding our economy and our educational system. The ailing economy poses a serious threat to our schools and colleges and unless we act now to protect funding for education, the state’s future will be bleak. More than a decade of state budget cuts and partially offsetting tuition increases have left the base operating budgets of Wisconsin’s public higher education systems in the worst condition since the Great Depression. Access to, and affordability of, the university system are already endangered at precisely the time when the Wisconsin economy needs more high-paying jobs and a more highly educated workforce”.*<sup>iii</sup>

The regents must send a wake-up call as well: Wisconsin cannot continue its trend of diminishing state support for its universities, replaced in part by tuition dollars. The last budget cycle went far beyond trimming fat – to the point that the meat and bone of quality higher education were cut. A similar budget in the next cycle may send the system plummeting into an irreversible, downward spiral.

Wisconsin has experienced tough budget climates before. In his remarks to the regents in 1975, then President John C. Weaver observed the following:

*“The immediate public policy issue becomes clear. If we are to fulfill our missions as historically defined, we need to be certain the state still supports those missions, and supports them with the full realization that they cannot be fulfilled on the basis of static or declining resources. If we are to plan for long-term fiscal austerity and retrenchment, this needs to be directed with the complete understanding that this will require a most basic change in direction for the State of Wisconsin – a deliberate decision to constrain, for fiscal reasons, the levels of access to educational opportunity that have historically been provided”.*<sup>iv</sup> President Weaver’s words hold just as true today as they did nearly thirty years ago. He continues: *“We should give fair warning, and we must continue to warn, that we cannot go on reducing faculty and staff, as well as support for instructional materials and equipment, and simultaneously undertake the teaching of ever-increasing numbers of students. To attempt such is an inescapable proscription for irreversible mediocrity”.*<sup>v</sup> If we are to avoid that mediocrity, the state must reinvest in its system of public higher education or the system must downsize so that those students that it can enroll receive the traditionally high quality education that they deserve.

At the end of World War II, our nation’s economy had not yet begun to take off and thousands of our soldiers were mustering out of the military and returning home. Controversial legislation was pushed through the federal government that became known as the G.I. Bill. A massive infusion of support for higher education – in the form of facilities, program revenues and

scholarships – created unprecedented access to higher education and trained the doctors, lawyers, teachers, statesmen, engineers and other professionals who built the modern country that we enjoy today. In Chancellor Wiley’s words, “*Those decisions created the engine that powered the state and national economies for the second half of the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century*”.<sup>vi</sup>

A recommitment to higher education is necessary for Wisconsin today if we are to *Chart A New Course For Wisconsin* in terms of both quality of life issues for our citizens and economic stimulus for our state. Consider again the words of President Weaver: “*Decisions of great importance should not be taken without some sense of history...We should remind ourselves that for well over a century, the people of Wisconsin... have had great faith in public higher education. Above everything, I would covet the hope that through the difficult days of decision that lie immediately ahead, the citizens of Wisconsin will sustain that faith*”.<sup>vii</sup>

In conclusion, the decisions facing leaders in state government for the future are both patently simple and excruciatingly complicated. And history points out that this conundrum is not a new phenomenon. If Wisconsin consciously decides at this time – against all common sense – that it must continue its trend of withdrawing public support for its public universities, then the UW System must shrink until its available resources are adequate to support a quality higher educational experience for those students it can enroll.

If, on the other hand, Wisconsin and its leaders choose to continue and to reinvigorate our long history of public support for open access to public higher education for our citizens, then the necessary state resources must be found to fund our campuses and provide adequate financial aid for our students.

Wisconsin sustained its faith in its university system thirty years ago in President Weaver’s day – and many times before and since then – and, like him, we are hopeful that it will do so again, for this day. The university stands ready to help begin *Charting A New Course For Wisconsin’s Future*.

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<sup>i</sup> Article X, Section 6, of the state constitution ratified in 1848.

<sup>ii</sup> Chapter 36, Wisconsin State Statutes.

<sup>iii</sup> Wiley, John D. (2003 November). Higher Education at the Crossroads. *Madison Magazine*.

<sup>iv</sup> Weaver, John C. (1975 April 18). Report To The Board Of Regents In Response To The Governor’s Request On Reducing The Scope Of The University Of Wisconsin System.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Wiley.

<sup>vii</sup> Weaver.