

# WISCONSIN ASSOCIATION *of* SCHOLARS

October 23, 2024

Letter from WAS to Study Committee on the Future of the UWS

Dear Committee Members:

You have thoughtfully undertaken an enormously important task that will influence not only higher education but the very future of Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Association of Scholars is a twenty-five-year-old non-profit entity whose membership consists of individuals who have a background in education or are current or retired faculty from the UW System and other Wisconsin colleges and universities. The stated purpose of the WAS and our national organization, the National Association of Scholars, is to foster intellectual freedom, search for the truth, and promote virtuous citizenship. Our organization has addressed several of the macro issues upon which your committee also is presently deliberating.

The focus of the Study Committee properly has been on funding and governance. Leadership of the UWS has voiced several positions with which we agree. But the true test is whether words will be translated into action. President Rothman is seeking a large increase in state support for the UWS. It is reasonable for the political branches, in return, to demand that the UWS meet the expectations of the legislature and people of Wisconsin to deliver the highest standard of education in an intellectually diverse, discrimination-free learning environment.

A summary of key points we endorse include:

Hire intellectually diverse faculty to balance the left-wing perspective that is now dominant in almost all academic departments and disciplines. An example is the "Conservative Chair" embodied in last year's UWS budget agreement. The Chair has not been created, and this must occur before a national search can commence. Part of the funds requested by President Rothman should be utilized to fund not only that position but similar ones on all UWS campuses.

Eliminate diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) programs and standards. They have been utilized to discriminate and to lower educational and teaching standards, with devastating effects on campus climate as detailed in a recent review by the New York Times Magazine.

Reverse, or at least cap, the growth in administrative positions.

Support a broad reading of freedom of speech with recognized limits and sanctions for those who disrupt the educational function of the university. This includes ending all support for the woke/cancel culture.

Insist on the principle of institutional neutrality regarding non-core university functions.

Hire university leadership from a broad spectrum of qualified applicants – not simply those with distinguished academic backgrounds.

Hold university leadership accountable for their actions. Although the legislative branch must exercise due restraint in the management of the UWS, it also has a duty to conduct vigorous oversight of the system and demand accountability from university leaders.

Additional comment on several of the above topics follows.

**Modify or Eliminate Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Programs.** The words sound so innocent, but their application has too frequently led to lower standards and outright discrimination against applicants who don't fit into the current group of preferred identity categories or dominant ideologies. We see it every day. It is unfair to students, erodes academic excellence, and betrays the trust of citizens. For example, our members from medical school faculties are concerned about the ramifications of DEI-infused training for quality health care, as documented by the sharp decline in medical student performance at UCLA (<https://freebeacon.com/campus/a-failed-medical-school-how-racial-preferences-supposedly-outlawed-in-california-have-persisted-at-ucla/>). We firmly support intellectual diversity, equality, and integrity. We also support thoughtful efforts to assist all learners in attaining levels of achievement that will fully enable them to be fully contributing citizens and role models for their communities. But we must pursue these noble aims achieve this without engaging in outright discrimination. As Chief Justice Roberts has stated, "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race."

**Freedom of Speech.** Truth can only be discovered by rigorous, open discussion of ideas. We fully support the First Amendment. Sometimes this can result in uncomfortable situations – but that is the real world. We cannot coddle our students (or faculty) and expect them to arrive in the real world prepared for its rigors. But we can expect and demand that university leaders apply reasonableness to understanding the scope of free speech. They should not tolerate threats, harassment, intimidation, or protests that disrupt the learning environment or the civil discussion of ideas and issues. They must be willing to discipline those who disrupt the exchange of ideas and make efforts to reduce the likelihood that those disruptions take place. At the beginning of each school year, every UW campus should have a mandatory orientation in the first amendment and standards for civil

discourse. The entity created by President Rothman, the Wisconsin Institute for Civility and Civil Discourse should be empowered and equipped to lead on this effort.

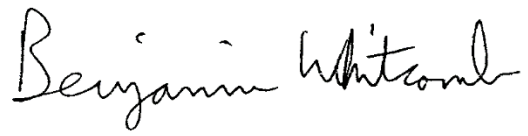
**Woke/Cancel Culture.** The intimidating ‘heckler’s veto’ approach to speakers and issues is the opposite of the openness and liberality for which a university must stand. In practice, it has meant that conservative students do not feel comfortable in sharing their opinions, and that conservative speakers are either not invited to campus or are disinvited. This has happened repeatedly and recently in UW schools and private universities. (See the Student Survey of 2022 and actions that were taken at Beloit and the Medical College of Wisconsin—where a U.S. Senator and the Chair of the University Oversight Committee of the State Assembly were disinvited from speaking on DEI in medical education.)

**Institutional Neutrality.** The university has every right to take positions on political issues related to its educational mission and core functions but should not as an entity comment on unrelated issues of the day. That must be left to individuals that make up the university community and others. The Kalven Report issued by the University of Chicago over a half century ago provides a full enumeration of this standard.

**The Selection of University Leadership Must Keep Pace with the Times.** The task of leading a higher education entity as president of a system, a chancellor, provost, dean or other senior staff administrator is enormously complex and requires a background suitable to the challenge. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education leaders must, among other things, deal with faculty, students, alumni, trustees, community interests, fundraising, and budgets. The Universities of Wisconsin (UW) budget is roughly \$7 billion per biennium. Additionally, they must work closely with government leaders including legislators, the Governor, and federal agency officials. Previous leaders have been selected primarily based on academic credentials and experience. This is too narrow a background for the next generation of higher education leaders. We urge you ensure a broader recruiting pool. An example of going outside the norm is Purdue University, led by former Governor of Indiana and OMB Director Mitch Daniels. In a short period, Daniels’ innovative leadership has made Purdue a national model. Another example is the University of Florida, which until recently was led by former Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska. We also applaud the creativity in selecting President Rothman, with his broad legal and management experience, to lead UW. Similar standards should apply for future senior higher education officials in the State. Processes for the selection should also be expanded to include some sort of approval requirement by elected officials. After university leaders are chosen, moreover, they must remain directly accountable to elected officials. The privileges and guarantees of academic tenured professors do not extend to the leadership and management roles of public universities.

The Wisconsin Association of Scholars stands ready to assist in any way.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Benjamin Whitcomb". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name and last name clearly legible.

Benjamin Whitcomb  
President, Wisconsin Association of Scholars