

Survey Results:

The Future of our Wisconsin Universities

In Summer and Fall of this year, ending on Thursday, October 24th, I participated in a Legislative Council Study Committee on the Future of the University of Wisconsin System. One of the shortcomings of this committee was the distinct lack of involvement from members of the general public. To help rectify this, my staff and I developed an informal survey for interested Wisconsin residents to complete. The goal was to see how members of the public viewed the UW System, how those who attended UW schools viewed their own experiences on campus, and to see if the [recommendations of the study committee](#) aligned with what members of the public want to see happen with our Wisconsin universities moving forward.

The Survey

It is a snapshot of opinion from politically engaged Wisconsinites. It was live from Monday, October 14th through the early morning hours of Monday, October 21st. All respondents were asked to self-report their name, home address, and ZIP Code in order to limit responses to current Wisconsin residents.

The survey link was shared via email with subscribers to my email newsletter, which are open to any member of the public who wish to receive them. It was also shared on multiple social media accounts associated with my office, including X, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and LinkedIn. Finally, it was posted on my official legislative website, senatorchrislaron.com.

While not a scientific poll, it represents the real opinions of real Wisconsinites on a variety of topics related to our Wisconsin Universities system, including general favorability of the system, the purpose of higher education, tax funding preferences, and the personal experiences of respondents who attended one or more UW System schools in their lifetime.

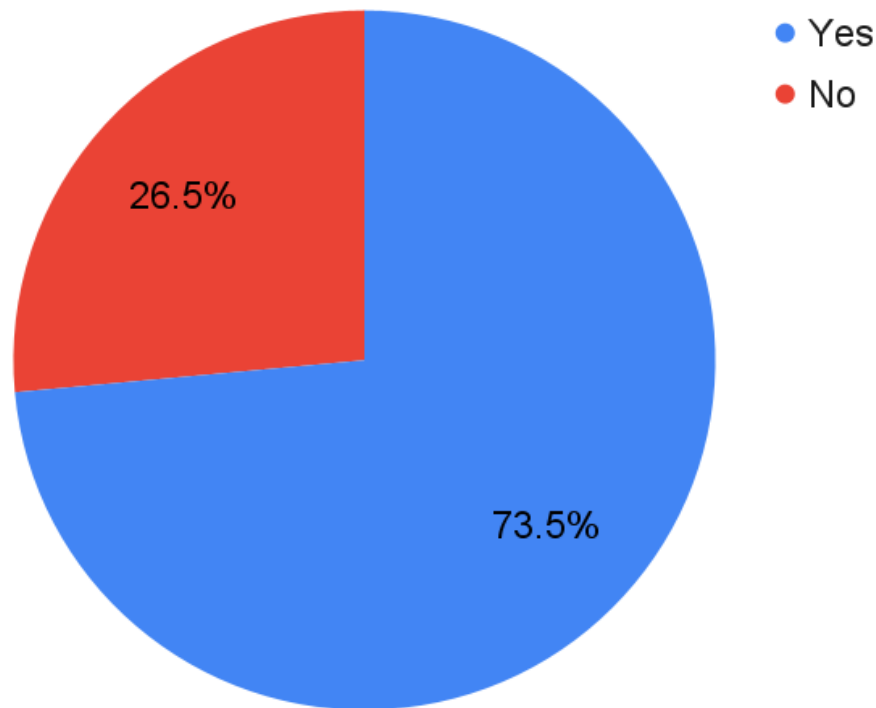
Who responded?

In just 7 days, 684 Wisconsin residents participated in our survey on the future of the U.W. System. They reside in 185 unique ZIP Codes in 151 Wisconsin municipalities. Approximately one-third of respondents reside in the City of Milwaukee, and nearly half (46.9%) of respondents live in the communities included in the 7th Senate District (Milwaukee, Oak Creek, Cudahy, Saint Francis, South Milwaukee, and Franklin). The top 10 municipalities are represented in the chart below:

Municipality	#	%
Milwaukee	222	32.5%
Madison	35	5.1%
Oak Creek	32	4.7%
Cudahy	20	2.9%
Saint Francis	20	1.9%
South Milwaukee	19	2.8%
Oshkosh	15	2.2%
Shorewood	15	2.2%
Green Bay	12	1.8%
Glendale	10	1.5%

The cohort of people who participated in our survey were more highly educated than the state at large, which is not surprising given the topic. Nearly three-fourths (73.5%) of participants attended at least one class at a UW campus, with 82.4% of those individuals attaining a bachelor's degree or above. About one-fourth of participants (26.5%) never attended a class at a UW campus. Their overall education status is not known.

Have you attended a public university in Wisconsin?

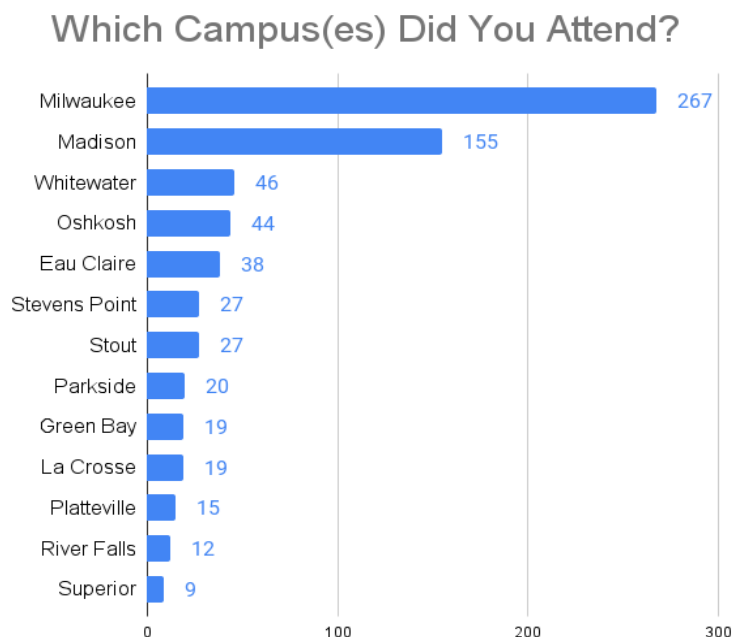


What did they say?

Before we dive into the results of our survey, it's important to note that there were two general types of questions included. The first consisted of multiple-choice questions with a finite set of available responses. Those were relatively easy to analyze, and will be discussed below. The second type consisted of more open-ended short answer questions. These were meant to offer a little more depth of opinion and stimulate conversation between our office and constituents. Given the subjective nature of these responses, the results are much more difficult to interpret at scale, and we will not attempt to do so here.

Which campus(es) did you attend? (check all that apply)

This question was only asked of the 73.5% of respondents who indicated they attended a UW school at some point in their life. The vast majority attended the UW System's two doctoral universities, UW-Milwaukee (53.3%) and UW-Madison (30.9%). All 13 of UW's 4-year universities were represented in our survey, with at least 9 individuals having attended all of the campuses. Note: the percentages do not add up to 100%, because many individuals reported having attended more than one UW campus during their career.



What is the highest level of education you completed at a UW campus? (optional)

This was also asked only of those who indicated they had attended a UW school. Nearly half (47.1%) ended their college career after completing a bachelor's degree. 29.3% finished with a master's degree, and 6.0% finished with a doctorate. Less than 15% of those surveyed ended their UW career without at least earning an Associate's degree.

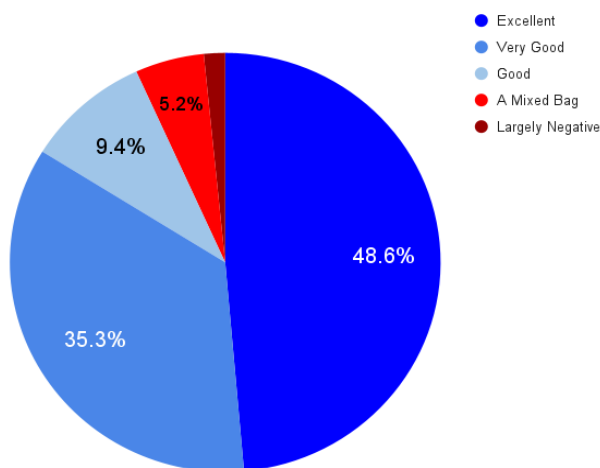
Unfortunately, just 0.4% of the UW attendees who responded were current students. Their perspective is invaluable, and we would have liked to see their voices better represented here.

Highest Level of Education Attained	
Education Level	%
Doctorate	6.0%
Master's Degree or Graduate Certificate	29.3%
Bachelor's Degree	47.1%
Associate Degree or Undergrad Certificate	2.0%
Currently attending	0.4%
Attended but did not graduate	11.0%
No degree or certification attempted	4.2%

Overall, how would you rate your experience at your UW campus? (choose only one)

Again, this was only asked of those who attended a UW school. An overwhelming majority (83.9%) rate their experience as either “Excellent” or “Very Good,” while just 1.6% rate their experience as “Largely Negative.”

Rate Your Campus Experience



Which of the following do you see as the purpose of a UW System education? (check all that apply)

This is the final question asked solely of those who attended a UW school. The remainder were asked of all 684 survey participants. While all four listed choices were broadly popular, two responses rose above the rest with over 80% of UW attendees in agreement. It's notable that learning for its own sake was at least equally important to current and former UW students as the career skills they took with them.

Purpose of the UW System	
Response	% Support
To broaden students' intellectual and cultural horizons	88.0%
To provide guidance on pathways to various careers	81.0%
To facilitate students' citizenship and respect for diversity in a multiracial democracy	65.9%
To create lifelong social connections and mentoring relationships	57.3%

Do you support increasing state investment in our public universities to maintain programming, staffing levels, and maintain/lower tuition costs?

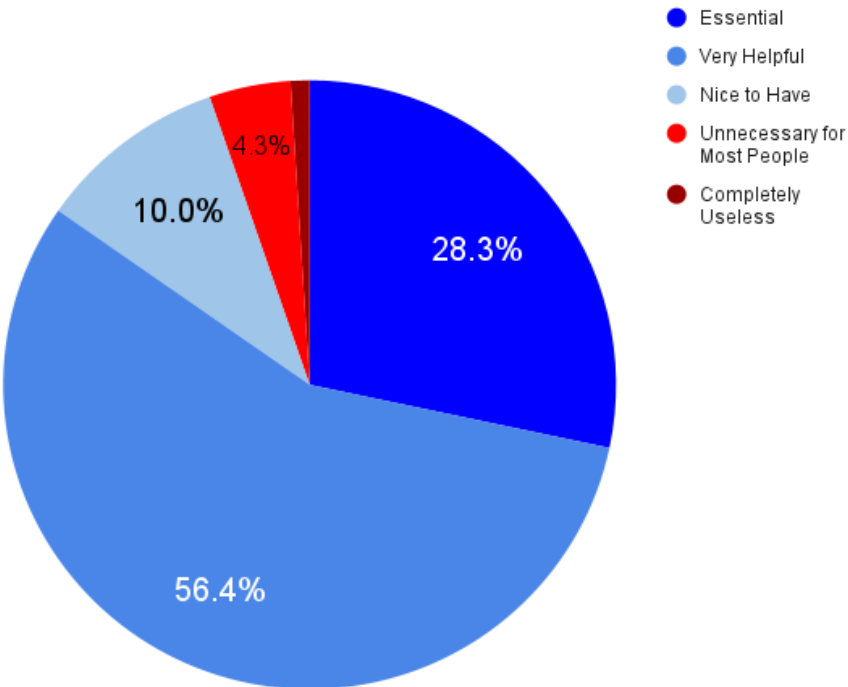
This question was prefaced by a very brief history of how state support for our UW System has fallen over the years, with students being asked to bear an increased share of the costs. A whopping 89.6% of respondents indicate at least partial support for increasing state investment in our universities system. Perhaps surprising to some, an almost identical proportion (89.5%) of participants who did NOT attend a UW System school agree with this sentiment.

Support Increased State Investment in UW System?	
Support Level	%
Strongly Support	82.1%
Somewhat Support	7.5%
Somewhat Do Not Support	2.3%
Strongly Do Not Support	5.3%
No Opinion/Need More Info	2.8%

What value do you place on a 4-year university degree? (choose only one)

86.8% of respondents rate a 4-year degree as either “Essential” or “Very Helpful,” while just 5.4% do not find significant value in such a degree. While some gains in pay for jobs that do not require a college degree have been made since the COVID-19 pandemic, a college degree is still a huge predictor of future wages, so it’s not surprising that our survey participants would put a high premium on it.

Value of a 4-year Degree



**Overall, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of Wisconsin's public universities?
(choose only one)**

83.4% of participants have a mostly favorable view of Wisconsin's public universities. 74.6% of those who did NOT attend a UW school agree with that sentiment.

Personal View of WI Public Universities	
Favorability	%
Mostly Favorable	83.4%
Mostly Unfavorable	7.2%
Neither Favorable Nor Unfavorable	7.5%
No Opinion/Need More Information	1.9%

Do you agree or disagree that the state legislature has harmed Wisconsin's university system by not adequately funding the needs of campuses across the state? (choose only one)

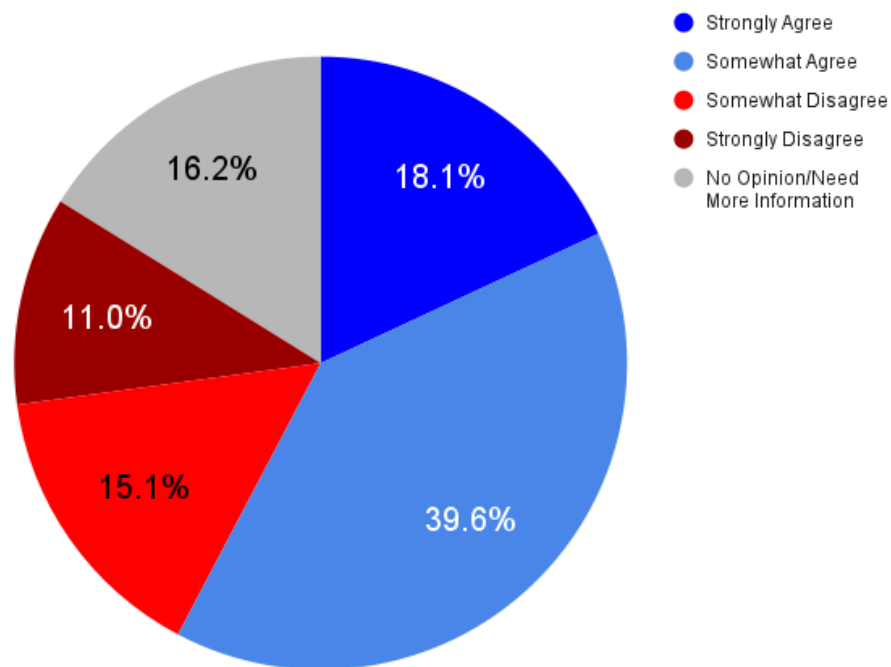
This question was prefaced by the fact that the UW System now ranks 43rd out of 50 states in proportion of state support for its universities system. 88.3% of respondents "Somewhat" or "Strongly" agree that this shrinking state support has harmed our UW System, while just 9.0% disagree in some fashion.

Legislature Has Harmed WI Universities	
Agreement Level	%
Strongly Agree	80.7%
Somewhat Agree	7.6%
Somewhat Disagree	3.1%
Strongly Disagree	5.9%
No Opinion/Need More Information	2.8%

Agree or Disagree: “I trust the UW Board of Regents to act in the best interest of all 13 campuses within the Universities of Wisconsin”

A clear majority (57.5%) indicate some level of trust in the Board of Regents, while just 26.1% express distrust in the Governor-appointed body. It is worth noting that this question generated the second-highest proportion of “No Opinion/Need More Information” of all those we asked. This makes some sense, as very few members of the public have any direct interaction with the Board of Regents, and their actions only make news on rare occasions - such as last year’s vote on the DEI changes included in budget negotiations.

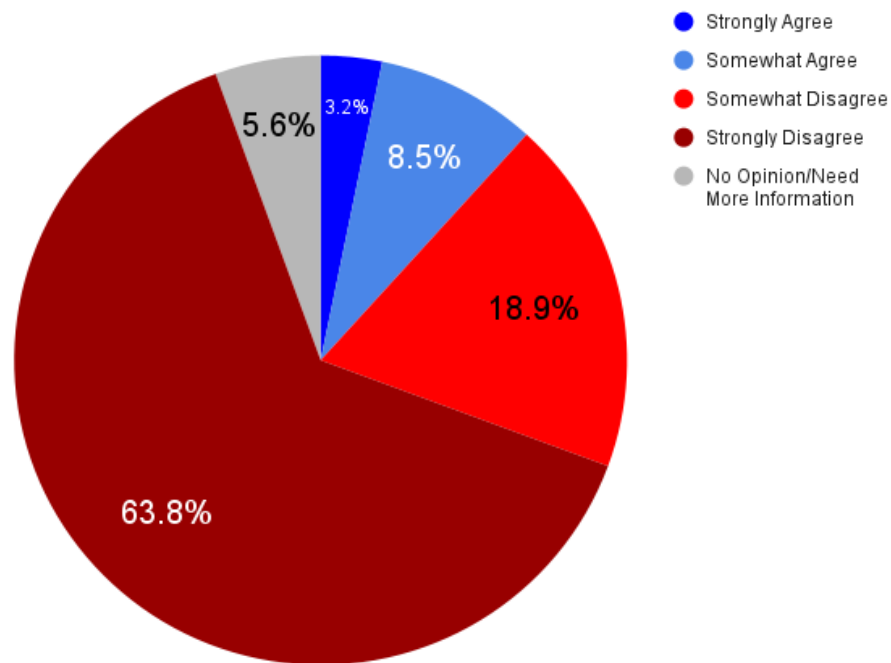
I Trust Regents to Act in Best Interest of all UW Campuses



Agree or Disagree: “I trust the Wisconsin State Legislature to do what is best for our public universities”

Participants overwhelmingly indicate a lack of trust in the State Legislature to do what is best for our public universities, with just 11.7% expressing trust in the body.

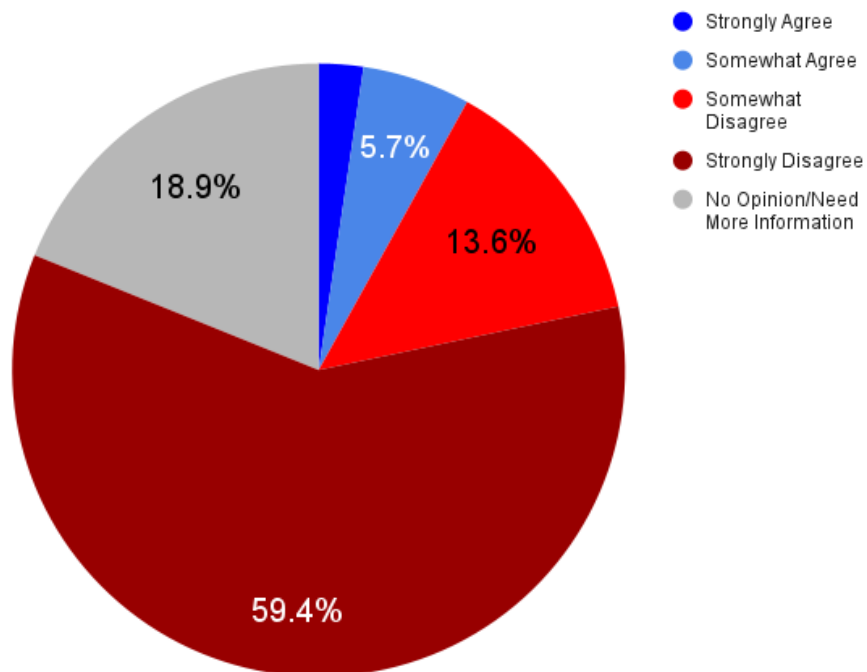
I Trust Legislature to Do What's Best for WI Universities



Agree or disagree: "I believe that it is a good idea to separate UW Madison from the rest of the university system and form a new system of campus governance created by the Wisconsin State Legislature."

Most participants do not think it's a good idea to separate UW-Madison from the rest of the UW System, with just 8.0% indicating support and 73.0% indicating opposition. It is likely many had not even considered this possibility before, given that 18.9% chose "No Opinion/Need More Information," the highest such rate of any of our survey questions.

Separation of UW-Madison & Proposed
Changes to UW Governance are Good Ideas



Agree or disagree: "Wisconsin's public university system is stronger when campuses are united under one system of governance and accountability."

Over three-fourths (78.5%) of participants agree that a united system of governance and accountability makes our universities stronger.

UW System Stronger Under Unified Governance & Accountability Model	
Agreement Level	%
Strongly Agree	50.9%
Somewhat Agree	27.6%
Somewhat Disagree	4.4%
Strongly Disagree	2.2%
No Opinion/Need More Information	14.9%

Looking ahead to the 2025-27 budget, do you agree or disagree: "In order to remain competitive, Wisconsin must increase its investment to the UW by passing the proposed budget submitted by the Board of Regents, which would bring Wisconsin back to the national average in state support for universities"

While similar to the question asked earlier in the survey about general state investment in our universities, this one is slightly different in that it asks about the Regent's 2025-27 budget request and the goal of bringing Wisconsin back to the national average. The results are remarkably similar to the first funding question, with 86.5% of respondents in agreement with the Regent's proposal and just 7.1% in disagreement. Among non-UW attendees, responses were very similar, with 87.9% in support of the Regents' request and just 8.3% in opposition.

Support Regents' Funding Increase & Return to Nat'l Avg State Support	
Agreement Level	%
Strongly Agree	74.8%
Somewhat Agree	11.7%
Somewhat Disagree	2.6%
Strongly Disagree	4.5%
No Opinion/Need More Information	6.3%