

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Council Study Committee on the Future of the UW System

FROM: Representative Alex Joers, Senator Chris Larson

RE: Proposals for Consideration

DATE: September 26, 2024

1. Shared Governance Restoration

As we continue to have conversations around governance at our institutions, it's vital that we include the groups that are impacted most: faculty, staff, and students. At our university system, there is no longer a statutory requirement that shared governance be involved in the decision-making process. Since this change was made in 2015, the role of faculty, staff, and students has been downgraded from "active participants" to "advisory to the chancellor."

Faculty, staff, and students are the heart of our universities. It is the role they play as active participants in their communities that makes our university system so great. It's reasonable to have them be active participants again in the decisions that shape these communities as well.

Restoring shared governance would ensure that our campuses are set down a path toward success in the future. Faculty, staff, and students are some of the groups most directly invested in the continued success of our campuses. You only increase the quality of decisions made by including them directly in the conversations about the best course for the future.

2. Structure for Further Study

We've had in-depth conversations throughout the course of this committee about charting the best path forward for our campuses, but there is far more discussion that needs to be had. Any decisions that could impact a group this significant in size need to be carefully considered with representation from all those who might be most affected by the change. In order to best facilitate this and ensure all voices are at the table, we propose that this committee recommend the creation of a Blue Ribbon Commission on Public Higher Education in Wisconsin.

Blue Ribbon Commissions have been used to provide in-depth analysis and further study on a wide variety of topics in Wisconsin, including recent commissions on issues such as Rural Prosperity or Veteran Opportunity. It is an avenue through which we can ensure that this important conversation continues.

By creating a commission through legislative action, we are also able to determine the parameters of study. Possible objectives that we could stipulate include: 1) to define the goals of higher education for this state; 2) to identify strengths to continue and expand, and weaknesses that need to be improved, in this state's institutions

of higher education; 3) to identify demographic trends affecting higher education in the state; 4) to identify strategies to enhance the state's attainment rate; 5) to encourage and develop innovations among institutions of higher education; 6) to encourage and develop partnerships between the UW System and the Technical College System; 7) to explore strategies to strengthen access and equity in higher education for students and potential students; 8) to explore strategies to reduce barriers to enrollment and degree completion; 9) to explore sustainable funding sources in state support and examine state funding challenges; and 10) to identify new ways to administer financial aid. The scope of this commission could be as broad or as narrow as we deem it to be, using the conversations from this committee to set the path forward for further study.

It would also be important to ensure that we stipulate the inclusion of a variety of perspectives and viewpoints on this commission. Its membership must include the following: students, faculty, and staff; representation from the leadership of both the UW System and the Technical College System; an equal amount of legislators from both sides of the aisle; the Governor; and experts in the fields of both workforce development and higher education. A commission of this nature would be well equipped to pick up where our committee leaves off and dive into the issues that matter most.

Throughout this process, we have touched on a significant number of topics that warrant more discussion that are not clearly defined in our scope. As this committee looks towards wrapping up, it would be prudent to ensure that a new group will carry the torch toward creating a more productive system of higher education in Wisconsin through a Blue Ribbon Commission.

3. Student Loan Ombudsman

One of the largest problems students are facing is affordability. With Wisconsin residents totaling \$23 billion in student loan debt, it's clear that more needs to be done to protect vulnerable young students from predatory lending.

Through the creation of an Office of Student Loan Ombudsman, we could ensure necessary consumer protections for borrowers throughout the lifecycle of their loan. Many borrowers around the state struggle to find the necessary information or guidance when working to repay their loans. The office would be able to serve as an advocate as they navigate the process, making them aware of possible qualifying repayment options and being a resource when facing potentially illegal or abusive conduct from their loan servicer.

The additional creation of a Borrower Bill of Rights in statute would work in tandem with the Office of Student Loan Ombudsman as a legal mechanism to enforce the standards created by the office. The Borrower Bill of Rights would contain three important components: the requirement that loan servicers be licensed through the State's licensing authority; the establishment of licensing requirements for servicers that set standards of practice; and the creation of regular reporting requirements for student loan data.

There is currently a startling lack of options for borrowers who are searching for reliable information on student loan debt. The creation of an Office of Student Loan Ombudsman and Borrower Bill of Rights is a common-sense step towards helping alleviate the student loan debt burden for many Wisconsinites in the future and improving economic outcomes post-graduation.