



Wisconsin State Legislature

FOR MORE INFORMATION

August 3, 2007

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A Growth Agenda for Wisconsin

Over the past weeks I have been talking about Wisconsin's University of Wisconsin Extension and Colleges. This week, I'd like to look at the rest of the UW System. The University of Wisconsin System is comprised of the UW Extension, with offices in every county, the UW Colleges, with 13 two-year campuses, and finally the 13 four-year campuses.

In many ways, our economy drives the UW and the UW drives our economy. When the economy is bad, universities across the nation are often the 'balance wheel' of state budgets. But the graduates of these institutions attract businesses that pay higher wages, build a stronger tax base, and help the state economy to rebound. The health of the state and the health of the UW System are inextricably linked. And that, in part, is why state does invest in the UW System.

The total budget of the UW System is just over \$4 billion. The state of Wisconsin provides less than 25% of the funding for the UW System, gifts and grants make up just over 25%, and the remaining half comes mainly from federal sources, and tuition. So we're not talking spare change. The UW costs the state taxpayers about a billion dollars – and students pay more in the form of tuition. But the UW gives back in terms of economic growth and higher paying jobs, which means a broader tax base that helps fund their efforts. The UW System educates over 162,000 students, and provides an economic impact of nearly \$10 billion annually. The stakes are high for Wisconsin, and for the UW.

The UW has developed a plan they call the Growth Agenda to provide for increased access, affordability to higher education and increased economic growth in the state. Decades ago, states made increased commitments to higher education, and the rest of the world followed suit. After years of leading the nation in college educated citizens, the US is starting to lag. If current trends continue, only 3 of every 10 eighth-graders will earn a college degree.

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The Growth Agenda focuses attention on those 3 in 10 children, but also on the other 7. The UW believes that without a college education in the new knowledge economy, too few of our youth will be qualified to hold high-skill jobs in an ultra-competitive global economy. Nationally, Wisconsin is below average in the number of college graduates, and, although we used to be virtually identical to Minnesota in terms of income and degrees, today we trail our neighbor fairly significantly in both measures.

Because the national trend of the US losing ground to other nations is coupled with Wisconsin's losing ground to our regional neighbors, the UW is taking a hard look at what they can do to help keep our state, and our children, competitive. The Growth Agenda also takes into consideration the changing needs of employers. As our population ages, and the baby boomers enter retirement age, the health care needs of the nation will continue to increase.

To meet the demand, we will need more nurses, and other health care professionals. To stay abreast of our competitors, the Growth Agenda would expand research and development, and boost the teaching of science, engineering, mathematics and technology.

One of the other innovative things the UW has done to become more accessible is to streamline credit transfer programs. In the past, transferring between institutions often meant students would lose many credits – and a lot of money in tuition – when transferring. Now, there is more uniformity than ever, and thousands more students are able to transfer from two-year and technical colleges, keep their credits, and earn their degrees more efficiently than ever before.

As the world changes, so must our institutions change. The UW System is working to stay ahead of the curve, and remain a national leader in higher education. You can learn more about the UW System's Growth Agenda at <http://www.wisconsin.edu/growthagenda/>.

Next week I will focus on the Wisconsin Technical College System and the many means they offer to students seeking higher education. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have on this, or any other issue: *call my office toll-free at (800) 991-5541; write me at P.O. Box 7882, Madison, WI 53708; or e-mail me at Sen.Olsen@legis.state.wi.us*. You can sign up for our newsletter at our website:

<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/senate/sen14/news/index.htm>.

