

Editorial:

What's Public About Our Public University?

by Kevin P. Reilly

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In higher education, what's the difference between public and private? Both public and private colleges enroll undergraduate, graduate and professional students. Both boast fine teachers and highly regarded researchers. Both have accredited programs, attractive facilities, loyal alumni and competitive sports teams.

So what are the distinguishing marks? Let's look at the three university missions of teaching, research and public service, starting with the last.

In Wisconsin, we believe that our public university system exists to serve all 5.3 million residents, not just the 160,000 enrolled students. The *Wisconsin State Journal's* March 22 story describes how UW-Extension faculty and staff bring objective, research-based information to bear on controversial issues, in ways that help a broad public make informed decisions.

Some folks don't like us to do that, especially if it gets in the way of their private agendas. Nevertheless, that's the job of the extension arm of any committed public university—to disseminate widely the most accurate information and analysis, without fear or favor, for use by citizens whose taxes support the institution.

The obligation to this kind of public service and outreach is one of the distinctive features that make a public university...well...public. This is especially true, and especially cherished, in the state that invented The Wisconsin Idea.

Another quality that should define a public institution of higher learning is broad access for students, regardless of their wealth. Wisconsin ranks high in this regard, with about 32 percent of the state's immediate high school graduates enrolling at a UW campus in 2002.

But look who's coming to college, and who's not. Over the 10-year period ending in 2002, the number of new students from families with annual incomes above \$61,000 increased by eight percent, while those from families with incomes below that level decreased at the same rate. As the erosion of public funding continues to push tuition higher, we are teaching an ever narrower, wealthier cut of the public.

Beyond enrollment and instruction, we must also examine how funding shifts affect university research. Surely, the research of a public university is freely shaped by the expertise of its faculty working in the public interest? Surely its fruits are available to address public needs? Maybe.

Fewer state tax dollars supporting research means that the creativity of UW scientists and engineers is increasingly directed by outside funders. Often, those underwriters have their own priorities and proprietary drives. During the past 10 years, research funding from non-state sources has grown by 64.3%, while state support for university research has grown by only 13.1%.

As a result, the research base that Extension educators use as the foundation for their work is becoming more beholden to private considerations.

Perhaps the question of what's public about our public university has a deceptively simple answer—public funding.

A recent analysis of state appropriations for higher education indicates that if the current funding trend continues in Wisconsin, the university will get no money from the state by the year 2040. That is, a decade before the halfway mark in this century, we will have effectively privatized the UW.

There is a story that as Ben Franklin was leaving one of the pivotal debates that produced the United States of America, he was asked whether we had a monarchy or a republic. He replied: "A republic, if you can keep it."

We have the great public University of Wisconsin, but only as long as we decide it's worth the public investment to keep it.

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