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Op-Ed

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The UW System: Challenges and Opportunities Moving Forward

Governor Walker announced details of his 2015-2017 budget proposal that would turn the University of Wisconsin System (UW) into a public authority, extend the tuition freeze, and cut funding by \$300 million. In anticipation of the governor's Biennial Budget Address on February 3rd, a dynamic conversation has already begun among policymakers, members of the UW, and citizens in the state. Great change is often met with great anxiety, but this is also a time of opportunity. The governor's plan offers a strong starting point as we begin the budget-making process in the legislature where this proposal will be scrutinized more closely as we gather feedback from the public.

The goal is simple: provide tools to enhance education and increase efficiency to save taxpayer dollars. For too long, the UW was limited by volatile state budgets and onerous regulations. The UW has sought autonomy from state bureaucratic rules that are not conducive to higher education. Under a public authority model, the UW will have the ability to design their budgets and programs with consistency, which is important for an entity whose product and mission is not based on a two-year budget or election cycle. The tools given to the UW and individual campuses will create long-term opportunities to save taxpayers money. The administration, with faculty, staff, and student input, should have control of their decision-making process because they know best how to run their campuses.

I recognize the strain of \$150 million a year in reductions and the legislature will discuss whether this is an appropriate level to cut. As with any policy discussion, unintended consequences must be avoided. For instance, we do not want to jeopardize the opportunity for UW-Milwaukee to become a top-tier research university or see a large number of staff reductions across the system. We will hear worst-case scenario reactions from the UW and other stakeholders, but I am confident that over the next few months we will have healthy debates that ultimately result in a stronger UW.

The tuition freeze keeps Governor Walker's promise to the taxpayers of Wisconsin, but more discussion is needed to ensure that the UW continues to prioritize accessibility for in-state students and that our students are not hit with massive tuition increases two years from now. Recruiting more nonresident students who pay twice as much tuition as resident students will be tempting. I look forward to the dialogue on how autonomy will affect tuition rates because we

need to balance the needs of the UW with the needs of the students and the hardworking families who pay for a college education.

As Chair of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities, my vision going forward is the following: maintain the high quality of a Wisconsin education, mitigate potentially large tuition increases in 2017, preserve in-state accessibility, and empower the Board of Regents and individual campuses so they will be responsive and adaptable to evolving needs. Population trends indicate a smaller pool of incoming students, and an efficient UW that delivers value and a competitive advantage to attract and retain talented students and faculty will be more important than ever to the future success of the UW.

We all have challenges to meet and promises to keep. The UW has a rich history and long-held traditions that advance the Wisconsin Idea and we have the responsibility going forward to renew and enrich these ideals. The University of Wisconsin has been and will continue to be crucial to our state's success. In the very near future, I believe Wisconsin could have a better and stronger UW that exerts an even greater impact on every Wisconsinite.