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### **Shankland Column: Let's Reach Higher for Higher Education**

Wisconsin's funding for our state universities ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nation, and with the passage of the 2023-2025 state budget that failed to resolve the \$60 million deficit at our UW System, we will likely continue to drop. With the recent news that UW-Oshkosh has laid off 20% of its employees, UW-Platteville Richland is closing, UW-Milwaukee at Washington County and UW-Oshkosh Fond du Lac's campuses are stopping in-person instruction by June 2024, and the remaining ten branch campuses will "discuss future options," the jarring reality is that our higher education is at significant risk due to the neglect of the Republican-led Legislature.

*None of this was by accident.* It was a deliberate policy choice to ignore the results of a decade plus-long divestment in higher education while the state had a record surplus.

As declining student enrollment and significant funding cuts threaten the social and economic well-being of the communities supported by campuses across Wisconsin, we should heavily weigh the economic and workforce outcomes of withholding funding from these campuses over time. These communities are great places to live and work because of the energy, vitality, and opportunities made possible by our UW System campuses.

Undoubtedly, the closure of UW System campuses, especially our rural branch campuses, would be devastating for faculty, staff, and students. Some employees and students may leave the state, and other potential students may choose not to attend higher education altogether, as the costs and required travel would create hurdles too high to overcome. As the state budget came to fruition, President Rothman said, "Shrinking our budget when we need to invest in talent to win the war for talent would have serious consequences."

I agree with this statement. However, the reality is even more dire. With smaller campuses closing or going online, the cascading ramifications for rural communities will be devastating. Populations will dwindle as young people pursue opportunities elsewhere, including out of state. Local economies will shrink as the students, faculty, and visitors who supported the Main Street businesses leave town. Vacant storefronts and shuttered windows will serve as a reminder of what was and what could have been with adequate state support for our campuses and communities.

As we debated the budget on the Assembly floor, I offered an amendment to create a student success and access fund for our UW System campuses with deficits, providing my colleagues across the aisle with a commonsense solution to prevent campuses from closing. Unfortunately, they ignored my warning, voting to table the amendment. What's most troubling is that many of my Republican colleagues represent rural branch campuses. I warned then, "Those of you who represent a rural two-year branch campus, get ready. You are



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deciding today, and you decided the last decade, frankly, that you did not want to prioritize our students' futures."

Their refusal to properly fund the UW System, at a time when the state began the budget process with a record-breaking \$7 billion surplus, will hurt their own communities and constituents. And for what? Nothing other than to fulfill a political ideology that continues to turn its nose at one of the best investments we can make in Wisconsin. For every dollar we invest in the UW System, Wisconsin receives a \$23 return on investment.

It's past time to invest in one of the crown jewels of our state. For the last few legislative sessions, I have introduced the "Reaching Higher for Higher Education" legislative package to address the most pressing challenges impacting our state's higher education institutions, including providing funding for the UW and Tech College Systems, expanding need-based financial aid and tuition assistance programs for students, and ensuring affordability while helping increase enrollment. I invite my colleagues across the aisle to join me in this effort, as it is more urgent than ever.

Additionally, this week, the Joint Committee on Employment Relations chose to approve employee pay raises – without including UW System employees on the agenda, despite their raises already being approved in the 2023-2025 budget. Perhaps it's time to withhold legislative pay for politicians who play political games with tens of thousands of state employees' pay.

I implore my colleagues from across the aisle to put partisan politics aside, prioritize the needs of our constituents, and together, we can ensure that our communities and campuses in every corner of Wisconsin will thrive for generations to come.