



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
October 24, 2024

**CONTACT:** Senator Chris Larson  
608.266.7505

## **A better way forward for our Wisconsin Universities**

**MADISON, WI** – As the Legislative Council Study Committee on the Future of the UW System concludes its work, Senator Chris Larson, member of the committee and Ranking Democrat on the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue, issued the following statement:

“Enshrined in our history since the founding of higher education in our state, the Wisconsin Idea signifies the general principle that knowledge and education should be used to ensure that the people of the State may retain and exercise power within their government and the state’s economy.

“Once deeply valued by the state legislature, as expressed by robust funding to the system and a focus on expanding access and maintaining affordability, the UW System has since faced years of declining state investment. At the same time, increasing legislative interference has left our universities with one hand tied behind their backs, unable to adequately address the needs of students and their campuses.

“In budget cycle after budget cycle, the Republican majority has made our university system the target of sweeping funding cuts. With \$600 million in cuts to the system between 2011 and 2015, an unfunded tuition freeze lasting from 2013 to 2021, and their recent attacks on DEI, the Republican majority has steadily eroded state support for our public universities. In 2010-2011, state investment made up about 18% of UW system operations, with students picking up about 20%. This disparity has only worsened since. In the 2023-2024 academic year, state investment plummeted to 15% while the students’ share increased to 24%.

“Once a national leader in funding higher education, Wisconsin now ranks 43rd out of 50 in state government support. Rather than receiving needed funding increases as the cost of providing quality higher educational opportunities continues to rise, our universities were forced in the latest biennium to deemphasize Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices systemwide just to retain a frozen state budget allocation.

“As the Legislative Study Committee on the Future of the UW System concludes its work and its recommendations are put forward, it must be acknowledged that the same people who have directed this conversation also played a role in instigating and exacerbating the problems our universities now face. This committee was hand-picked by Republican leadership and did not involve key campus communities or solicit public input in its discussions. It even failed to hold any of its meetings at UW Campuses, despite several requests of the chair to do so.

WISCONSIN STATE CAPITOL  
P.O. Box 7882 • MADISON, WISCONSIN 53707-7882  
(608) 266-7505 • (800) 361-5487 • FAX: (608) 282-3547  
SEN.LARSON@LEGIS.WI.GOV • SENATORCHRISLARSON.COM

“Among the laundry list of non-committal and ill-defined recommendations released by the committee, two stand out for the potential harm they would bring upon higher education in Wisconsin: the separation of UW-Madison and the restructuring the UW Board of Regents to include legislators.

“From the onset of this committee, it was clear that several of its members were committed to continuing former Governor Walker’s divide and conquer strategy to separate UW-Madison from the other 12 full-service campuses. Widely rejected in 2015 (and remaining highly unpopular today), their plan would disrupt the coordinated efforts of our campuses, duplicate bureaucracies, and do little to address the long-term needs of higher education in Wisconsin. This move would likely benefit donors and corporations wealthy enough to buy influence at a newly restructured flagship campus, but it most certainly would not benefit students, faculty, or the people of Wisconsin.

“In a similar regard, we must reject the idea that adding political influencers to the leadership apparatus of our university system is anything more than an attempt to give the same people responsible for over a decade of disinvestment and unwanted interference even more tools to tear it down and remake it in a partisan image.

“We can best support the UW System, its students, and our communities by maintaining a unified governing structure, significantly increasing state investment, and renewing our commitment to the Wisconsin Idea. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the new legislative session on a budget that funds our universities in a sustainable fashion while guaranteeing an affordable college education for all Wisconsinites. If we do that, we can once again rely on higher education as the bedrock on which we build the best state in the nation for generations to come.”