

Discussion of UWM's Strategic Situation

UW-Milwaukee (UWM) is searching for a new chancellor—the fourth time since 1997—so it is useful to review the past as well as looking forward as we consider our situation. Over the last 17 years, the campus has grown from around 22,000 to 30,000 students in 2010, and now has dropped back to almost 28,000 (as the state faces a dip in the number of high school graduates). During those 17 years, the campus also created two new schools (Freshwater and Public Health), doubled its doctoral student enrollment, and created a broad array of new undergraduate and graduate programs. UWM is also in the midst of a building boom, with a new science building set to open in 2015 on campus, new satellite campuses downtown and in Wauwatosa, and the acquisition of the huge Columbia-St Mary's Hospital complex on the East Side. Additionally, dormitory space has doubled to 4000, so that the campus can offer a dorm slot to all entering freshmen.

All that growth is exhausting as well as exciting, and particularly so, since the expansions of the past five years have taken place during a global economic crisis, political upheaval in the state, and budget cuts in state spending for the university system overall—UWM in particular. Over the 17 year period, infusions of new funds have been fitful at best, with some years seeing decent increments to the university's budget to support the expansion, but in other years, absolute cuts, or flat budgets—made possible by painful tuition increases for students. Capital improvements can be financed with bonds, but of course the bonds eventually also need to be paid back. UWM, unique to the UW System, has a particularly challenging mission. It is the second doctoral campus in the university system, elevated to that status in the 1960s, and envisioned as a “premier urban public research university.” It also, though, has always had an “access” mission, to be Milwaukee's campus, open to commuters, part time students, nontraditional age students, and dedicated to educating and serving the diverse Milwaukee community. That mission was also integral to the overall conception of the State's entire higher education system.

When Wisconsin expanded the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s and then consolidated the state teachers' colleges and the University of Wisconsin in the 1970s—creating the UW System—state government committed to making accessible, affordable, and high quality higher education available to the far corners of the state. Perhaps unique in the nation, Wisconsin built small two-year campuses in rural areas not close to an existing public institutions of higher education, so that rural and farm families could send their sons and daughters locally for the first two years of college. In the “urban corridor” from Kenosha to Green Bay, the state expanded UWM to research status and built two entirely new campuses to serve Green Bay and Racine-Kenosha. All these expanded institutions were “commuter” institutions, if you will, serving urban and rural residents who could not commit to a four-year residential college experience.

Fast forward 40 years—UWM's research academic resources, facilities and profile classify it as a “high research activity” campus. Meanwhile, suburban development has overtaken a number of the two-year campuses, particularly in the Milwaukee metro area. UWs-Green Bay and Parkside have grown into residential as well as commuter campuses, as has UWM for its freshmen. Arguably though, the footprint of this 1960s-1970s era vision for UWM remains at the core of

the structure of the institution. However, state funding for UWM has never provided the resources to adequately support the requirements of the campus research AND access mission. In good economic times, a bit of surplus in the state budget would begin to plug the resource gap, and students and their families were expected to tolerate some tuition increases. But the strain of the precarious funding situation came into truly dire focus given the turmoil of the past five years, when the state's overall economy suffered. Yet, like other large public institutions, the deep mandates to maintain both missions remain.

So we need to focus on who we are, what we are doing, and why we do what we do, so we and our stakeholders (students, local community, legislators, and community and business partners) can plan to address our funding challenge. Some worrisome statistics illustrate the dilemma:

* UWM historically has had volatile freshmen enrollment, which in turn creates a boom and bust cycle in undergraduate enrollment and curriculum. The access mission underpins policies which expand and contract the freshman class as the pool of Wisconsin high school graduates waxes and wanes. The campus had 1800 new freshmen in 1994, 3000 in 2000, 4500 in 2007, and 3200 in 2013. The size of the Wisconsin high school graduating class has been declining since about 2007, but will soon begin growing. How can the campus manage the boom and bust cycles that affect curriculum, dorm space, and revenue? Can they be stabilized? At what level, and at what tuition revenue yield?

* UWM students are financially needy. 80% receive financial aid. The campus federal student loan budget of about \$170 million provides over 85% of the total campus tuition revenue budget. Those loans have to be paid back, arguably putting a long term burden on alumni and depressing the potential of the regional economy, since so many UWM alumni remain in the local area.

* In the mid-2000s, the state committed \$240 million in capital building (primarily bonding) for UWM as part of the University of Wisconsin (UW) System's state economic development agenda. Coupled with that, the Regents committed to a 6-year infusion of \$30 million in state general purpose revenue to support the expansion. Only \$10 million was provided, however. As a result, new buildings and expansions have proceeded without needed supporting revenue sources, which threaten the viability of the research growth envisioned from these new facilities.

* Roughly half UWM's new freshman class (1500-1800 students) are not "college ready" as measured by the need to enroll in remedial math or English. UWM provides the largest remedial education program in the UW System. The campus 6-year graduation rate is affected accordingly. For students with no remedial needs, 6-year graduation rate for students admitted in the mid-2000s is about 64%, as opposed to rates in the 40% range for all new freshmen.

These are just initial points of discussion, but can help frame the larger issues to come in the chancellor search, and among the larger UWM community.

For greater detail on these matters see the institutional profile prepared for the chancellor search: www.uwm.edu/chancellorsearch.