

UW-Milwaukee University Committee Statement on College Affordability

February 3, 2015

The effect of rising tuition rates on college affordability is a growing problem that is closing off educational opportunities to increasing numbers of lower and middle income individuals. Typically, this problem is laid at the feet of the universities and their faculty/staff/administrators. However, at least at public universities in Wisconsin, this assignment of responsibility is misplaced.

To make that point, let's examine one simple financial measure across the entire University of Wisconsin-System (UWS) from 1980 to 2012: the combined annual amount of tuition revenue and state support (General Program Revenue, GPR) obtained per student. From 1980 to 2012 this tuition/GPR revenue combination rose at a rate only slightly higher than the Consumer Price Index (CPI), a general measure of inflation. Here's what that means: the cost of providing UWS education per student in constant dollars (i.e., adjusted for inflation) changed very little from 1980 to 2012.

Yet, tuition (creating the student affordability problem) has risen substantially over the period. Why? Because state support (GPR) declined in almost mirror image to the increase in tuition. So, let's summarize: tuition increases across the UWS are NOT the result of increased operating costs (faculty/staff salaries, etc.), but due to decreasing state support (GPR). Over the 1980-2012 period, the State of Wisconsin has systematically disinvested in the UWS and its students, shifting the cost burden from the State's tax base to the individual student.

Let's switch to the present. Since 2012 state support has been cut further, tuition levels have been frozen, and now the largest cut in UWS history has been proposed by the Governor for the next two years (along with a continuing tuition freeze). Further, the Governor has flippantly suggested that UWS faculty should simply "work harder" in order to make up for the proposed cuts.

There is an often quoted expression from the movies: "You don't want to hear the truth, you can't face the truth." Our State political leaders seem unwilling to face the economic truth about the UWS: namely that you cannot cut your way to a quality education. The problem is not the cost side of the equation, it is the revenue side. If the State is unwilling to provide GPR revenue, and tuition is frozen, quality will suffer. However, if tuition is allowed to rise steeply, our identity as an affordable public university system is in jeopardy. Nevertheless, we are in a competitive market, both for students and for faculty; the best and the brightest can go elsewhere. If inadequate finances continue to cut into the quality of our programs, and further erode the compensation of UWS employees, then our future and the State's destiny will be quite dim, indeed.