

OPINION

Budget investment, modernized space will help UWO respond to teacher shortage | Commentary

Andrew J. Leavitt, For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

Published 3:10 p.m. CT April 25, 2019 | Updated 9:13 a.m. CT April 26, 2019



The headlines spell it out: Fewer students are enrolling in teacher education programs, particularly in the areas of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and special education. Small-town and big-city school districts alike can't find enough applicants for available jobs. Wisconsin has a teacher shortage that threatens our future.

In 2015, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction identified this as one of "the most critical" policy issues facing our state. Task forces have convened, and reports have been issued. How will we as a state respond to the need for more and better-prepared teachers?

UW-Oshkosh has a plan. We ask for support of Gov. Tony Evers' and the University of Wisconsin System's biennial budget proposals that invest in our response to rural and urban teacher shortages. UWO also needs legislative support for phase two of the state's 2011 commitment to the long-planned and repeatedly delayed renovation of our teacher-education center. The clock is ticking, and this ready-to-go renovation project's price tag is rising — to the tune of more than \$1 million every year over the past five years. It's time to get it done.

As I testified Wednesday at the Joint Finance Committee hearing in Green Bay, at UWO we are planning critical investments in our teacher education programs. Preparing teachers who will nurture and shape future generations has been at the heart of all we do since we opened as a teacher's college in 1871. In 2021, we celebrate our sesquicentennial year. As a university of three campuses and 16,000 students strong, I can think of no better tribute to our roots than a strong reinvestment in the cultivation of teacher talent.

Wisconsin badly needs to attract, retain and graduate students in high-need, teaching shortage areas. We are also starving for teaching talent in STEM. And across disciplines throughout the state, there is a clear need for more teachers who better reflect the increasing diversity of our K-12 student populations.

UWO is uniquely positioned to help. The university is experiencing historic increases in enrollment of students of color, and we see an opportunity to inspire, launch and support more students in the journeys to become successful Wisconsin teachers. We are also working toward greater mentorship of student teachers, more partnerships with high schools and expansion of English as a second language and special education instruction, which Wisconsin demands.

To achieve these goals, we need a modern teacher-education center. But there is no need to break new ground. Since 2011, we have had plans ready to go for a cost-effective building renovation. We must get it finished.

The renovations will provide exactly what UWO and Wisconsin need to respond to the teacher shortage: modern classrooms that mirror those our graduates will immediately work in. With the demand for teacher talent so urgent and clear and our plans ready to go, it's time to finish the project.

UWO graduates about 300 teachers each year, and we want to push ourselves to new heights. We have a plan. We have a building (we just need to bring it up to date). We have an anniversary approaching that reminds us of our roots and responsibility.

We are asking legislators and the governor to support a responsible plan that enhances programs and buildings UWO already has.

As we rededicate ourselves to UWO's nearly 150-year-old promise of transformative teacher education for a stronger Wisconsin, we also ask that the people of the state reinvest in our efforts and help us get the job done.

Andrew J. Leavitt is the 11th chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh.