Recommendation #1: The new UW System president should work with the three system-level representative groups and individual campus shared governance to help facilitate a culture of transparency and shared decision-making in System-level initiatives.

A key concern of faculty and staff across the UW System has been a lack of transparency in System-level decision-making processes. In the recent past, UW System Administration has made critical decisions without consulting key shared governance constituencies, and there would have been better outcomes had System done so early in the process. During his tenure, for instance, President Ray Cross ordered a merger between the four-year campuses and the thirteen two-year UW-College campuses. No governance bodies were consulted about which campuses would merge or how these collaborations might best work (or whether they would work at all). The result of this merger has been uneven, and inequities between two-year and four-year campus faculty and staff have often been divisive. Convening stakeholders to determine the best way to merge campuses would have made this process much more likely to succeed everywhere.

As another example, during his last few months before leaving office, President Cross proposed a plan that would reduce academic offerings and potentially close campuses. Again, no faculty or staff representative bodies were consulted. In the end, the plan received little support from any quarter (including the Board of Regents), but for several months this proposal caused anxiety among faculty and staff already struggling to navigate the global pandemic.

When the Board of Regents searched for a new President to replace Cross in 2019, their search committee—against the advice of every governance group—included no faculty or staff representatives. The entire search occurred in a black box. In the end, the sole candidate, Jim Johnsen, withdrew because the Regents failed to anticipate widespread public backlash against a candidate who had cut significant academic programs in the University of Alaska system.
This history is important because it explains the distrust felt by many toward System administration. The search that ended in the hiring of Jay O. Rothman was a much improved and more transparent process. Three faculty and an academic staff representative were included on the search committee and a small number of faculty and staff participated in the finalist interviews in January 2022. Nevertheless, the search process did not include public interviews. Many faculty and staff on campuses around the system were concerned and expressed skepticism about Mr. Rothman’s lack of academic credentials. Several groups that represent faculty and staff, including the American Federation of Teachers-Wisconsin and the American Association of University Professors-Wisconsin issued public statements of skepticism (See appendices). It is important to note that this skepticism arose simply because many faculty and staff knew little about the candidate beyond what they read in the media, and those who participated in the search process were barred from saying anything publicly that might have mitigated it.

We want to see Mr. Rothman succeed in this role. We believe that his legal expertise and political acumen, both of which were evident throughout the interview process, are assets to the UW System in the same way that President Tommy Thompson’s political acumen was an asset. However, most faculty and staff in the UW System know little about Mr. Rothman or his priorities. We recommend that Mr. Rothman engage as much as possible with stakeholders, both at the System level and on individual campuses, in his first 100 days in office. We suggest that he meet with the joint representatives (academic staff, faculty, university staff, and students) as soon as possible to establish a relationship so that we can help inform important strategic decisions. We suggest that he also commit to regular meetings with these groups.

We also suggest that Mr Rothman meet with AFT-Wisconsin and AAUP-Wisconsin. These need not be broad open forums, but could be targeted meetings with leadership to discuss shared priorities.

Finally, we suggest that within six months he visit each campus (including all of the branch campuses). This will help us to overcome the suspicion that stems from our recent history, and it will allow him to learn the qualities, missions, and concerns of each campus. As feedback from one campus’s governance groups pointed out, “the 13 campuses that make up the UW System are each unique in their strengths, approaches, and needs. The incoming president must take adequate time to learn about each institution so he can best support our missions and tell the story of the UW System as a whole when engaging with legislators to garner support.” Furthermore, the President needs to understand the key differences between the missions and impact of the eleven regional comprehensives and the unique needs of our two research institutions.

Recommendation #2: The new UW System president must understand two important and immediate concerns of faculty and staff: academic freedom and the potential for consolidation of programs (or even campuses).
A great deal of political contention has surrounded the UW System over the past decade. In the past year, two existential threats have emerged causing faculty and staff to worry deeply about what may happen after the November 2022 election.

The first is the specter of a so-called “critical race theory” bill that recently passed both the Colleges and Universities committee and a floor vote in the state legislature. (This bill is similar to a K-12 education bill that was passed by the entire legislature and vetoed by Gov. Evers in February 2022.) This bill, A.B. 413, would force faculty and instructional academic staff on every campus to post their syllabi so that a student or employee could seek “declaratory or injunctive relief” if they believed that an institution taught “that one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex and that an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, bears responsibility for acts committed in the past by other individuals of the same race or sex.” Institutions in violation of this bill would risk losing a substantial portion of GPR funding. Of course, this criterion is subjective and would amount to a dangerous chilling of free speech in virtually every classroom. If this bill were signed into law, it would so stifle academic freedom on our campuses that it would be difficult to continue to call the work we do higher education. Furthermore, it would fundamentally challenge the UW System mission itself, which is built around the notion that “Basic to every purpose of the UW System is the search for truth.”

Indeed, this bill is a solution in search of a problem, and as the representatives on one campus pointed out, “continued demonization by some members of the Legislature and local and national media of the work of university employees, particularly faculty, for their expertise and alleged bias” is deeply undermining faculty and staff morale. Furthermore, as a recent piece in The Chronicle of Higher Education points out, a bill like this could threaten the accreditation of our institutions.

The second major issue is the potential of a legislative push to repopulate the Board of Regents with appointees who support the specific plans of Sen. Roger Roth to consolidate campuses and potentially eliminate academic programs. Six regents currently serve unconfirmed, and Sen. Roth has publicly stated he will only confirm regents who support the recommendations outlined in his May 2021 report. Much of his argument for reducing university access relies on questionable assumptions that Wisconsin will see a sharp drop in the number of college students in the future, and that online instruction is no different than instruction in the classroom. Unfortunately, Sen. Roth’s assumptions are empirically incorrect. Though our state will see a slight decline in births in the upcoming years, official government projections show these hardly represent a catastrophic cliff.1 Though we may need some recalibration (which we would argue is already happening on our campuses), we hardly need to take such rash and excessive actions.

While the UW System president cannot control the political winds of the state, he must understand the serious threat the storm poses to our fundamental work and the depth of our fear

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165 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties have actually gained population over the last decade: https://doa.wi.gov/DIR/Final_Ests_Summary_2021.pdf. Further, US Department of Education projections show the number of high school graduates will actually increase slightly through 2029: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_105.20.asp?current=yes
and frustration. President Rothman needs to offer assurances he will do everything in his power to protect the core mission of the UW System.

We want to be clear: as faculty and staff, we are not arguing that nothing should ever change regarding the system and campus program array. Indeed, our system was created fifty years ago, and much has changed since. But we must ensure that fundamental shifts arise from a shared process between System and campus administrations, students, and the faculty and staff who are most closely connected to the communities our institutions serve.

**Recommendation #3: The new UW System President should work to empower and support each individual campus’s strategic priorities within a transparent process of equitable decision-making about access to System resources. The goal is a System-wide program array in which campuses are not encouraged to compete with each other.**

Academic staff, faculty, and university staff agree (and are joined by many campus administrators and regents on this point) that one of the key problems in UW System administration over the past decade has been a lack of clarity about its role. We could point to many examples, but one recent, illustrative example is an effort by the UW System in 2021 to implement a program called Distance Education+. Without soliciting feedback from faculty or academic staff representatives, System proposed a plan to foster more online education in Wisconsin at the expense of existing online efforts on individual campuses. Had it passed, it would have provided perverse incentives—for instance, faculty on individual campuses would have been paid more to teach for the UW System than for their own campuses!

Faculty and staff understand the need for investment in distance education and the premise of DE+ was laudable. But the proposal had obvious problems, and until it was clear it was untenable, UW System administration continued to ignore feedback from individual campuses.

Moving forward, we recommend that President Rothman offer transparent criteria for determining how UW System will support individual campus initiatives without undermining them. It is perfectly appropriate for System to pool the resources of individual campuses around some administrative functions, but efforts to centralize services over the past few years has not always made things easier or more efficient on our campuses. Some System-level initiatives, for instance, ShopUW+, PeopleSoft, and travel reimbursement procedures, have, in fact, made work more difficult and less efficient for many faculty and staff. We request an evaluation of how “centralization” is working for campuses and more support for transitions to new systems.

Further, faculty and staff on every campus agree that the primary focus of UW System should be to enhance the mission of each campus without dictating priorities. In particular, faculty and staff would love the UW System to provide the marketing resources that are limited on most campuses. It is time for the UW System to build a marketing campaign that clearly illustrates the strength of the entire system. The formerly two-year campuses, especially, will require dedicated marketing targeted toward boosting enrollment and retention. The governance leaders on one campus pointed to the importance of “aggressive marketing,” particularly toward non-traditional
students, first-generation students, and students of color. Marketing that makes visible the excellent research, instruction, and community work we provide would help to mitigate revenue losses from the slightly declining numbers of high school students our state will see in the future.

We would also like to see support for the physical infrastructure of our campuses. As a governance group on one campus aptly pointed out, “Lack of bonding authority and control over building projects hampers the ability of campuses to deal with major maintenance issues (pieces falling off of buildings) and assure that building projects that are done on time [and done well].” In some cases, lack of investment in the physical capacity of our campuses has significantly limited accessibility and safety. The faculty and staff would like to see President Rothman advocate for our infrastructure.

Finally, President Rothman should lead a process at UW System to ensure campuses complement each other and are not given more incentives to compete with each other. Clearly, individual campuses do compete with each other to some extent, but faculty and staff would like to see President Rothman create a rigorous and transparent process for evaluating new academic program creation that balances the strengths of each campus.

**Recommendation #4: The new UW System President needs to understand the widespread harm to our mission and our students (and the resulting demoralization of faculty and staff) due to active disinvestment by our state legislature. Mitigating the ongoing state of fiscal crisis is a monumental challenge and the UW System President must be a fierce advocate for more funding and greater pay equity.**

As we solicited suggestions for this set of recommendations, there was unanimity that chronic underfunding has created a crisis in the UW System. Two reports by the Wisconsin Policy Forum (one focused on UW Madison and the UW System as a whole and another focused on UW Milwaukee) reveal a staggering decline in public funding between 2000 and 2019: In 2000 state and local funding was 6.4% higher than the national average, and as recently as 2010, state funding still made up the majority of funding for Wisconsin's public universities. By 2019, however, funding of the state system had fallen 16.5% below the national average and per-student funding was continuing to fall rapidly (UW Milwaukee, for example, reported 27.9% less per-student funding than peer institutions). While in other states tuition freezes have frequently been followed by increases in state funding, this is not the case in Wisconsin, where active disinvestment is accompanied by unfunded tuition freezes and restrictions on implementing differential tuition.

The dearth of resources impacts our ability to market and maintain our academic programs, to maintain physical infrastructure, to support research, and to pay employees competitive wages. Indeed, almost every employment category in the UW System is underpaid relative to peer.

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institutions in our region. (This is the case even for upper administrative positions such as the UW System president.)

This lack of support has impacted different constituencies in different ways. On the faculty side, it means talented researchers and teachers have left the state of Wisconsin for institutions that provide higher salaries and more resources for teaching and research. For those who stay, salary compression (new faculty hires who make as much or more as senior faculty) is a pernicious morale problem on most campuses. There are also deeply concerning gender discrepancies on most campuses in the UW System.

For academic and university staff, morale over endemically low pay has been worsened by the UW System’s Total Title and Compensation project. Rolled out during the COVID crisis, many staff members have had their job titles and duties unilaterally altered. In spite of whatever objective benefits the TTC might provide to staff (and UW System HR have not shown much evidence that university or academic staff will benefit from these changes), the roll-out of the project has led to widespread feelings of demoralization. Combine this with higher wages in the private sector, and academic and university staff are leaving our campuses. Not only is this a problem in terms of staffing campus needs, but worker turnover drains the cumulative staff experience and institutional knowledge necessary for a university to function well.

This latter point is particularly significant as the UW System works to ensure we are meeting the needs of our potential students. To ensure our campuses are ready for all the different categories of students that will mitigate a slight population decline, we must be ready for first-generation students, adult learners, and students from immigrant families and other historically marginalized groups. To meet the needs of these future students, we must be poised to provide world-class instruction, advising, financial aid, mental health counseling, and other student services. This requires that we recruit, support, and retain our staff.

As the governance group of one campus put it, “nobody wants to work harder or put in the effort with no support, reward, or value appreciated. Passion only goes so far and the great resignation has been highlighted as ‘compensate or dissipate.’ If we cannot begin to pay competitively within our region, we will see increased resignations leaving behind further staffing and operational challenges.”

We understand there are constraints on President Rothman’s ability to act. But understanding these headwinds, advocating for the resources we need with business and community leaders as well as the state legislature, and thinking creatively about how to free up existing resources would all go a long way in ensuring our system moves in a more sustainable direction.

Recommendation #5: The new UW System president should be at the forefront of convening stakeholders across the UW System and beyond to develop a truly collaborative strategic vision for the future.
The UW System has long been at the forefront of providing excellent research, education, and community engagement in our state. Despite the political headwinds we face, UW System faculty and staff believe we can recommit to being a nationally leading system of public higher education. We want to ensure our system is both meeting the needs of and providing opportunities for the great state of Wisconsin. We ask President Rothman to let us be a driving force in this endeavor.

Here are a few suggestions about how we might do that:

- UW System should urge other stakeholders to join us in creating a Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Wisconsin that would look at the state’s two public higher education systems: UW System and the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). The commission should consider not only ways to ensure the UW System and WTCS complement each other, but also develop strategies to better market and promote UW and WTCS to those who would benefit from higher education. The commission should draw on the expertise of the UW System faculty and include legislators and business leaders in its membership.

- UW System should create a Tribal Colleges-UW System Advisory Council to ensure our system of higher education is better aligned with the goals and needs of our state’s tribal colleges.

- UW System should create a Climate Resilience task force so that public higher education, building on the history of the Wisconsin Idea, can play a leading role in helping to mitigate and arrest the catastrophic trajectory of anthropogenic climate change in our state.

This list of suggestions is not comprehensive. The academic staff, faculty, and university staff representatives are enthusiastic to be part of the strategic planning process.
January 20, 2022

On January 14, 2022, the UW System Board of Regents announced two finalists for the position of UW System President: Jay O. Rothman and James C. Schmidt. In any search, it is important to consider both the process and the outcome.

The 2019–2020 search under the previous Board of Regents leadership failed because of a deeply flawed process that excluded faculty, staff, and students (except for one student regent) from the search committee and provided no opportunities for their meaningful input. In contrast, the 2021–2022 search process under new Board leadership has been much more inclusive and with far greater respect for shared governance. These improvements are the direct result of the successful mobilization of faculty, staff, students, and alumni by AFT Wisconsin and other organizations in the previous search to oppose a single finalist who was clearly unfit to lead the UW System.

We welcome the generally improved search process under new Board leadership. However, we are disappointed that the Board is not holding public sessions with either of the two current finalists. This decision is contrary to the open and transparent spirit of good governance that our state has historically embraced, and it deprives faculty, staff, and students of the opportunity to get to know the finalists who seek to make decisions about our working and learning conditions. We therefore join the Wisconsin Conference of the American Association of University Professors in calling on the Board to rectify this mistake.

Relatedly, in terms of the outcome of this search, we believe that any finalist for any leadership position in our great state’s university system must clearly and publicly demonstrate:

1. expertise in our core system mission of searching for the truth which also means; a. they demonstrate significant experience teaching in a specific academic discipline and b. they have a public record of successful scholarly endeavor in an academic discipline.
2. a significant and publicly available track record of supporting academic freedom, shared governance, and due process at the higher education level.
3. a public track record of supporting the Wisconsin Idea.
4. a public track record of support for Transparency in Government and Wisconsin’s open meetings laws including specifically supporting full transparency and the holding of open meetings in the search and screen for UW system president.

Also, in terms of our beliefs about necessary outcomes of this or any comparable leadership search, we believe to the utmost degree possible it should result in as diverse and inclusive a final candidate pool as possible to select from.

We have deep concerns that the current search to date for UW system president has not produced a final candidate pool that satisfies a number of the aforementioned desired outcomes. We might be able to overcome these reservations if the finalists were given the opportunity to address them in public sessions. Without public sessions, we are left with deep concerns about both candidates.
Wisconsin Conference of the
American Association of University Professors

Statement on UW System President Search

January 18, 2022

This past Friday, the UW System Board of Regents announced two finalists for the position of UW System President. Faculty, staff, students, and the general public now have a brief window of time to get to know the candidates before the Regents make their selection. Unfortunately, the Regents have chosen not to hold public sessions with the finalists. We believe that this is a mistake.

The search process for the new UW System President has been a dramatic improvement over the one that resulted in a failed search in 2019–20. Under its new leadership, the Board has restored the traditional role of faculty on the search committee. Shared governance representatives will have an opportunity to meet with the finalists and ask questions, another marked improvement over last time. Together with related changes to the chancellor search process (undoing several ill-conceived changes that took place under previous Board leadership), this has gone a long way toward restoring faculty confidence in the Regents.

It is puzzling, then, to learn that the Board will not hold public sessions with either of the finalists. Such sessions present a unique and valuable opportunity for people from across the UW System and the general public to hear from the candidates directly. Holding such a session for the lone finalist was the only good decision the Regents made last time. Whatever else may be said about that search, it is inarguable that the public gained valuable information, and that the end result was better for it.

Thus, while we applaud the Regents for the many improvements they have made to the process, we are disappointed in this unforced error at the end. We call on the Board to schedule public sessions with each of the finalists. We have no doubt that the two candidates would be up to the task. And if not, that would be important for everyone to learn before the Regents make a hiring decision.