



University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

05/08/2016

Members of the University Senate,

It has come to my attention that a motion to take a vote of no confidence in the University of Wisconsin System President and the Board of Regents will get a first reading at your meeting this Tuesday, May 10. As the President of the Student Body and Student Senate, as someone who has personally worked with legislators for the past two years in various official capacities, and as a student, I wish to convey my absolute opposition to this motion in its entirety.

Though perhaps well intentioned, this motion and the bill text put forward by the authors is embarrassingly naïve and represents a massive misunderstanding of politics in the state of Wisconsin. Given the political environment in which the University of Wisconsin System operates, advocacy on behalf of universities has been exceedingly difficult. A particular segment of the state legislature is vehemently opposed to the UW System based on an ideological basis; one that is not rooted in fact or open for discussion. Despite that, these are still the people that determine the collective future of the university. I have actively lobbied the legislature for the Confluence Project, in opposition to the Campus Carry Act, and against cutting the UW System by the \$300 million Governor Walker proposed. I can tell you that, in my over 100 legislative meetings in Wisconsin, improving the UW System's fortune is not about persuasion. It is about working with the people in power to build relationships so they may show us some good will. They will decide what happens to the UW System, and I'd rather have us be a part of that conversation than not. (Let me be clear- when I refer to 'legislators' in this letter, I am only referring to members of the Legislature that opposed increased funding for the UW System.)

That's why this proposal is so unproductive for UW-Eau Claire's students and faculty. The people who work day in and day out to make the case for the UW System are, in fact, the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents and President Ray Cross. They are smart, politically-competent people who understand the balance of power and what we're up against. They work constantly with the business community, legislators, and the governor's office to build the influence necessary to impact decisions that are being made. They know that change in policy occurs from negotiation, and in closed-door meetings without the kinds of massive protests that have failed to move this legislature and administration in the past. To say that they don't represent the System or fight for the Wisconsin Idea is so incredibly backward and irrational it is almost impossible to engage with those remarks. That's because I, along with the Board of Regents and system president, am burdened with reality.

Here's the reality of the situation that the motion doesn't even begin to touch upon:

Tenure

Tenure wasn't struck from law just because legislators thought it would be more appropriate to have it in UW policy. They got rid of tenure in state law because many find tenure to be ridiculous: they don't believe in lifetime job security, usually because of a very entrepreneurial/capitalistic set of beliefs, and they don't want to pay people that they see as 'coasting' in a safe job. Obviously, I disagree, as I know all of you do. However, an impassioned, rousing argument for tenure is going to have zero impact on this audience. In fact, it will reinforce their belief that faculty are out of touch with the reality they feel most

Wisconsinites experience. There was a virtual impossibility of changing these legislators' minds on tenure, and some would have preferred to ban tenure altogether.

It would have been political suicide for the Regents to implement a policy that is stronger than the one legislators already didn't like. Implementing such a policy, like the Madison Faculty Senate's proposed policy, would only invite the legislature to strike it from UW System policy and then meddle with any other policy they choose to. For instance, a tuition freeze is a decision over which the Board of Regents and System have authority, but that hasn't stopped the Legislature and Governor from making it anyway. Enraging them by seeming impudent, in their eyes, on tenure would have been a disastrous decision. Though unpleasant, the current tenure policy was our best political option.

I know what some of you will say in response to this. "You don't understand the importance of academic freedom. Faculty need to have their voices heard." "Tenure is more important than politics. The current advocacy being done hasn't worked. It's time to be radical and send a strong message." "You constantly work with administration, so of course you support the establishment." "We spoke up and got the Wisconsin Idea put back into statute— we can do this again for tenure." I'll address each individually:

- Perhaps I don't have as deep an understanding of academic freedom as you do. I have, however, met with more legislators than anyone, except perhaps Chancellor Schmidt, that attends University Senate meetings. What I do understand is the unwavering negative stigma and contempt legislators have for tenure.
- False. Tenure is politics. We're a state entity, and elected officials have power over these policies. It is imperative that you understand the environment in which we operate is dominated by political figures, not best practices from the AAUP or any other agency. Marching on the Capitol for tenure only increases the perception that university faculty have excess time on their hands, and allows elected officials to portray you as irrational to their base. The reduction of the proposed cut from \$300 million to \$250 million and the restoration of segregated fee authority to student shared government didn't happen magically; it was the work of the system, chancellors, President Cross, and student leaders across the state that negotiated those changes. Going back to how things were before cuts and changes were proposed was never an option. It was either make the best of the hand we were dealt, or fold completely. That's all the balance of powers and nature of Madison in 2015 allowed us to do; other suggestions on how to make change occur were either ill-informed or delusional.
- I work with students every day and during the first seven weeks of spring semester 2016 I was in Madison six times fighting to change perception to benefit students. Student advocacy is my business, and I take that responsibility seriously. If I support the administration, it's because they understand the situation and know how to most effectively counter the forces that seek to weaken our system.
- The "drafting error" that resulted in the deletion of the Wisconsin Idea was a land mine that the administration didn't mean to step on. I doubt they knew of its significance. The immediate, negative backlash and news coverage was a distraction from their other policy objectives, so they put it back to make the controversy stop. This was an "accident." The legislature's positions on tenure are not accidents. They're well-articulated positions that they ran on and got elected for. Those opinions aren't going away.

Don't just take my word for it:

“Rather than tenure being about academic freedom, it seems to be more about job protection. It's this idea a tenured professor could decide they don't have to show up, or keep up with ideas in their field.”

–*Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 06/12/15*

“People should be based on performance, they should be based on merit and going forward if we have a program like that in any part of state government, it's going to be a good thing.”

–*Governor Scott Walker, NPR, 06/12/15*

Vote of no confidence

I am honestly not sure what the authors hope to accomplish with this motion. I've already heavily covered the negative impact this will have in state politics by allowing legislators to delegitimize you- and I can't emphasize that enough. Beyond that, I can only fathom a few possible outcomes that the authors may hope to accomplish, which are also riddled with contradictory effects.

- Do you want President Cross to resign from his job? Based on section 11 of this motion where you say “the actions of President Raymond Cross and the Board of Regents give the UW-Eau Claire University Senate no confidence in their commitment to defending the Wisconsin Idea,” it's not an unreasonable assumption to guess you'd want someone in whom you have no confidence to resign from their position. That would, of course, be incredibly unproductive. If President Cross were to resign, hypothetically (as these kinds of motions would never impel that sort of response), the system would then begin a multi-month search process to find a qualified candidate to head the system. This person would start in the fall, and come into the beginning of the 2017-19 state budget process with just a few months' experience working in Wisconsin. How does that help faculty? Students? Academic freedom?
- Do you want to work with President Cross and the Board of Regents? That seems to be the point of section 12, which says “recommit themselves to the Wisconsin Idea by carrying out their responsibilities and working with us.” Though I have ample experience as a legislative liaison and will be attending graduate school to study communication and advocacy, I don't have to use any of that to say that telling someone you have no confidence in their ability to do their job is a terrible way to initiate a partnership to improve advocacy efforts. Any student would be able to tell you that. Any student would also be able to tell you that the UW System and President Cross have obviously been “working with the state legislature to make a positive case for improved access, affordability, and educational resources for our students; for additional support for scholarship and its associated economic benefits; for greater resources for outreach and services to citizens of the State;” as that's been the crux of most news stories about last year's budget process. Just because we didn't get everything, or much of anything, that we wanted doesn't mean that the work wasn't being done. If you don't think they're capable of doing their jobs, and you also want to work with them, what's the point of any of this? Does this resolution have a clear purpose other than amateurish, indignant outrage?
- Do you think this will make legislators aware of the Wisconsin Idea? Legislators are already aware of the Wisconsin Idea; some just don't like it.
- Do you want to look foolish and make the budget battle more difficult next year? That's all I'm getting from this.

Again, don't just take it from me:

"The No Confidence vote isn't really about President Cross or the Board of Regents. The radical faculty at UW-Madison are rejecting the values and expectations of the people of Wisconsin. They are backhanding the middle class families who are pleading for controls on tuition and an end to wasteful spending in the UW System. Passage of the resolution will prove that even more institutional reforms are urgently needed and must be included in the next state budget to protect tuition-paying students." —*Senator Steve Nass, press release, 4/27/16*

"This faculty group seems to be having a hissy fit over some pretty minor changes, which bring us in line with most of the nation's universities, and do very little to change the overall idea of tenure... it would go to show exactly why some changes were necessary... This (resolution) doesn't reflect well on the university at all, doesn't reflect on the faculty, does nothing to further the reputation of the campus." —*Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke on Madison 'no confidence vote,' Wisconsin Radio Network, 4/27/16*

I'm sure someone on University Senate may say that this isn't a vote of no confidence, but a resolution supporting the Wisconsin Idea. No one—not the media, not faculty, not students—is going to buy that, as this smacks of a watered down vote of no confidence dressed up as something else to make the action more palatable. That doesn't change what this is.

Tuesday

I'd like you to consider what else this motion does that isn't written. If passed this would reflect on all faculty at UW-Eau Claire, many of whom are logical and have an understanding of state politics. Do you think they want to be associated with this? Have you asked them about a vote of no confidence? Are you ready to suspend the rules and vote on this motion Tuesday? Unless you're comfortable with your answers to the previous questions, you shouldn't be.

Finally, the Board of Regents and President Cross were not the only individuals to use politically-competent advocacy strategies. Your students did too. In March of 2015, the Student Senate organized the "Rally for Excellence," a day-long advocacy trip to Madison. We brought over 50 students with different backgrounds and political beliefs to share their stories from UW-Eau Claire with legislators. They were not demanding, nor did they castigate representatives for being critical of the UW System; they merely shared their stories and asked them to consider a different viewpoint. That's how students can have an impact in Madison these days, and we received positive feedback and respect in return.

Yet for some reason the wrong-headed logic in the proposed motion conflates putting in effort with achieving your goals—'there must not have been work done ahead of time if we didn't get what we wanted.' Obvious post hoc, ego propter hoc fallacy aside, the authors' child-like petulance doesn't just trivialize the work of the regents and President Cross. It's tantamount to a vote of no confidence in the students who went above and beyond to help influence a more positive outcome. Is that the message you want to send?

This kind of dramatic, self-important bill doesn't allow for conversations to occur. It shuts them down, alienates the people who fight for you through the entire budget process, and gives legislators ammunition for their next assault on the System. You're all elected to the University Senate because you are experts in your fields and areas of research; not because you're an expert on every subject. I hope you have the

humility to consider another viewpoint, as presented in this letter, and step back from the precipice of this stereotypically ill-informed, pointless motion.

Do not suspend the rules and vote in favor of this motion Tuesday. Doing that would be so unbelievably out of touch it would, unfortunately, serve as the perfect example for opponents of the UW System to spew when they cast negative aspersions on university instructors and shared governance. That would give me very little confidence in the University Senate indeed.

With high expectations,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jake Wrasse". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jake Wrasse
Student Body President, 59th Session of Student Senate
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire