

## Free Tuition in Wisconsin

by Thomas C. Reeves

Wisconsin politicians and business executives are currently pondering two proposals designed to make higher education less expensive, boost enrollments, and expand the state's economy. One or the other may well become law. Since a college diploma seems to the vast majority of Americans to be directly and almost exclusively tied to higher income, the proposals have a considerable following. Both, however, are in serious need of further study. There are lessons here that apply throughout the nation.

The first, advocated by Democratic Governor Jim Doyle, would grant free tuition to a University of Wisconsin System campus to all financially needy eighth graders who stay out of trouble, take a specified core curriculum, and graduate from high school with a "B" average. The program is obviously designed in large part to send more African-Americans to college at state expense. But tens of thousands of whites, Hispanics, and Asians would also qualify for the program, depending on the income level that is established to qualify for assistance. (Similar programs exist in Indiana, Oklahoma, and North Carolina.)

The obvious flaw here is that almost half of all high school students, according to the Census Bureau, receive "A" averages now. And what teacher would deny anyone, let alone a needy member of a minority, the right to a free college education? Grades would be even further inflated.

Moreover, with thousands of additional students pouring into state campuses, more money would be needed for new construction and faculty. Taxpayers, already heavily burdened (Wisconsin ranks number six in taxes), would bear costs that could become staggering. Doyle contends that the proposal would cost only \$7 to 10 million a year. That seems very low. But then financial data are not the governor's strong suit. After his reelection in 2006, state taxpayers learned that the state was \$1.6 billion in debt. A short time later, the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, using standard accounting principles for private companies, discovered that the state had a deficit of \$2.15 billion. The final figure, depending on a lawsuit, may go higher. (Last fall the Governor set a record by spending nearly \$10.5 million on his reelection campaign.)

Which campuses in the state System would these thousands of students be permitted to enter? Madison is not in the same academic league as, say, the Superior or Parkside campuses. (The open admissions policy of several of the System campuses keeps almost no one out at present.) Would there be a hierarchy based on grades and test scores? Or economic need? Or race and color? In short, would free tuition carry strings? If not, then the vast majority of recipients would surely head for Madison, not only for the prestige but for the award-winning party life available in "mad city." Could that already crowded

campus handle the increase? Those who were sent elsewhere might well resent being excluded and consult lawyers.

A second proposal, floated by a state commission containing several business leaders, would grant free tuition to all state residents, regardless of income, who promised to remain in Wisconsin for ten years after graduation. That would supposedly stop the “brain drain” (20% of System graduates) to states with warmer climates and lower taxes. The objections raised above apply here as well. And how many of the thousands flocking into System campuses would major in areas that would likely benefit the state’s economy significantly? People majoring in art, social work, women’s studies, literature, anthropology, music, philosophy, and history are unlikely to have jobs that will boost Wisconsin business. What proof is there that free tuition would increase the number of bio-medicine, accounting, health care, engineering, and computer science majors?

And what recourse would the state have if a graduate left the state after, say, five years? Would officials want to jail the offender or sue to win financial compensation? That might well enrich state lawyers but could do grave damage to Wisconsin’s national image.

What Wisconsin truly needs is a reexamination of the high financial costs and low academic standards currently in place within the U.W. System. (Wisconsin sends \$990 million annually to the System, which spends \$4.1 billion a year to operate 13 four-year universities and 13 two-year campuses. The state currently collects more than \$800 million a year in tuition and fees from some 160,000 System students.) This System veteran of 31 years believes that several campuses in the complex need closing, many hundreds of bureaucrats need firing, and many majors and degrees need to be scrapped—on grounds of intellectual integrity rather than any cash-producing strengths or weaknesses. But don’t look for that to happen soon. Not as long as politicians and businessmen can promise free tuition.