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UW System Graduation Rates Holding Wisconsin Back *Authors of WPRI Report Suggest Recreating Four-Year Outstate Campus*

Freshman enrollment at four-year University of Wisconsin System campuses is up this fall and, according to a new WPRI paper, will likely continue to climb in the years ahead.

But less than 30% of students who enter as freshman graduate from the UW System institution where they start within four years, according to the report, *“Back to the Drawing Board: How to Recreate the Outstate University And Finally Give Students Their Money’s Worth.”* Less than two-thirds of students graduate from any UW campus within six years of starting, based on tracking of freshmen who entered UW schools in 2006.

“If a talented, capable 18-year-old never finishes her degree, that’s an enormous loss for the state and a personal tragedy for her,” said Ike Brannon, president of Capital Policy Analytics and one of the authors of the report. “Unfortunately, that happens all the time in Wisconsin. This paper looks at why, and how we might change things going forward.”

“The four-year schools attract plenty of new students,” said WPRI President Mike Nichols. “The problem’s not getting them in; it’s getting them out. There’s been a lot of attention in recent days on an overall decrease in enrollment, but that’s not due to a lack of freshman, and it’s not necessarily a bad thing if the schools are starting to move students through faster. At any rate, there’s plenty of evidence there’s room for a lot of improvement in our four-year schools.”

Among the problems, according to the report: teaching loads for both tenured and tenure-track professors remain too low; spending on areas unrelated to instruction is too high. The report also notes a traditional ambivalence at some campuses regarding the needs of local employers.

The report recommends tying state funding to key campus metrics such as attrition and graduation rates, ratios of students to administrators and success of graduates.

In addition, Brannon and his co-author, Philip Coyle, make numerous recommendations that, were a campus outside Madison or Milwaukee recreated or started from scratch, could help students graduate in four years with a valuable degree: make summer school part of the regular calendar, judge professors at outstate schools mostly on classroom performance rather than their

research agendas, refocus more spending on matters directly related to instruction rather than research or sports, and use more instructional staff and adjunct professors with practical experience in their disciplines. A credit-earning internship would be expected, and financial aid would decline after four years.

“There would be an embrace of a liberal arts curriculum but with a nudge for liberal arts majors to pursue a complementary supporting minor in a STEM field as well. The development of ‘certificates’ in certain specialties would help students who want to study liberal arts simultaneously obtain some sort of credential to augment their career pursuits,” the paper states.

The report also delves into tenure, a benefit that WPRI believes needs further reform. In a survey of 522 instructional staff members, the authors found that most non-tenure track instructors perceive themselves as having strong job security already and therefore “don’t seem to put much weight on receiving tenure and its benefits.”

Some of the survey results were released earlier this year in a prior paper that noted that more than half of instructional staff believe the caliber of instruction at their university would be a little or much worse if there were no tenure at all. At the same time, the paper released today concludes, a university that started from scratch could offer a reduced form of tenure at relatively little cost and retain the flexibility to be more responsive to the needs of students and employers.

“It may be the case that (were a university to be created from scratch) reducing job protections – and at the same time keeping the intellectual protection that is the core of tenure – while raising faculty wages would be a cost-effective tradeoff for the university to make,” the authors conclude.

“What matters most is making our universities more responsive to students increasingly interested in getting a worthwhile degree without incurring big debt,” said Nichols.

A widely shared story in the media in recent days noted that UW System fall enrollment is down 5,000 students and noted concern about the loss of tuition dollars on some campuses. That decrease is largely due to fewer students at the two-year UW colleges – which have about 3,000 fewer students than they did last fall. The four-year campuses have approximately 2,000 fewer total students, but that is mostly due to big decreases in the number of non-freshman at UW-Milwaukee and UW-Stevens Point. All told, there are approximately 460 more freshmen at the four-year campuses this fall than last fall, a 2% increase. Freshman enrollment at four-year schools outside Milwaukee and Madison is up over 3%. Total enrollment, in the meantime, is down 1% at all four-year schools and also at the four-year schools outside Milwaukee and Madison.

The full study is available at www.wpri.org. Ike Brannon is also available for interviews.

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, established in 1987, is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit think tank working to engage Wisconsinites in discussions and timely action on key public policy issues critical to the state’s future.