

## Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

### **An investment the state needs to make**

*Higher education drives economies and pays back public investment in high dividends of productivity and tax dollars. States that transform their schools to adapt to economic needs and conditions thrive.*

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Editorial

It's now a truism: The shift to a knowledge economy is making college more vital than ever. But are Wisconsin's institutions of higher learning fully aligned with this brave new age?

Challenges abound, as a panel of college officials and others agreed last week. Campuses must get in better sync with the training and educational needs of workers and with the labor force needs of business and industry. They must improve on racial and class diversity. And they must solve big fiscal problems.

What's more, time is running out to meet these goals. As measured by income trends, the size of the "creative class" and economic performance, neighboring states have better adapted to the new economy than has Wisconsin.

Six college chiefs, a student leader and a foundation head shared their views at a round-table discussion - one of a series hosted by the Journal Sentinel's Editorial Board.

Here are goals to help move Wisconsin's higher education squarely into the 21st century, as distilled in large part from the discussion:

- Campuses must mesh better with each other so that, for instance, a qualified student at Milwaukee Area Technical College can transfer with ease to the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Institutions must better help workers cope in a world where they change jobs and even careers far more frequently than they once did. Colleges must give such workers new training and make it convenient for them to get it.
- Colleges must better meet the educational and training needs of businesses - and on short notice.
- The governor, lawmakers, regents and others must settle on what share of the cost of a UW education the state must pay and what share families must foot. The state share has been falling and the family share rising, without any benefit of a discussion or a plan.
- Colleges must step up student aid for lower-income students, whose ranks have alarmingly shrunk, particularly on UW campuses, because of rising tuition. The state and the

federal government must devote more of their coffers to that end - which Gov. Jim Doyle has started to do.

- Campuses must keep working at improving racial diversity - which is crucial on many fronts: improving the educational atmosphere for all students on campus; preparing all students for the real, multiracial world; closing such racial gaps as in income; providing minority communities with a professional class.

- Society must fix Milwaukee's broken kindergarten-to-12th-grade pipeline of students into college. Too few Milwaukee high school grads are college-ready.

- The state must boost the research capacity at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, as Chancellor Carlos Santiago has called for, to help bolster the area's economy. A La Follette School of Public Affairs research paper attributes Wisconsin's lower-than-average per-capita income to "the absence of a mega city with a large financial and business services sector." Building up Milwaukee's economic muscle may not specifically help that sector, but can't help but benefit the state and spur business.

Education is key to a vibrant city, state and nation, as Alverno College President Mary Meehan noted. Santiago elaborated: "We not only educate the citizenry of the state, but we're also creating the knowledge that's driving the economy."

UW-Madison Chancellor John Wiley underscored the value of a college education in a unique way, noting that state taxpayers spend a total of almost \$100,000 to educate a student from kindergarten to high school graduation. But if that student goes into a workplace with just a high school diploma, he's not likely to repay the state in full in taxes.

"So society gets back its investment in K-12 education only through whatever incremental investments they make in post-secondary education.," he argued persuasively.

Father Robert Wild, Marquette University president, noted the importance of training students in ethical values.

A dark cloud over University of Wisconsin campuses is declining support from the state treasury. Santiago noted that today, UWM gets 23% of its funds from the state - a source that contributed more than 40% 10 years ago.

"The irony is that, while I think there's a realization that universities are indispensable in today's economic landscape, the public sector has been disinvesting in public higher education across the country."

UW Regent Charles Pruitt observed that declining public support has translated into higher tuition, which, in turn, has led to a drop-off in enrollment by students from lower-income families. As Pruitt noted, if the state is serious about expanding the number of residents with bachelor's degrees, it must reverse this troubling trend.

Private colleges are picking up some of the slack. Wild noted that a quarter of last year's freshman class comprised students who were the first generation of their families to attend college. And Meehan said that 37% of Alverno students are women of color. But Wild said the public tap of financial aid for students at private colleges is slowing. The challenge is to raise the funds from private sources.

Rob Grover, president of the student association at UWM, noted that the shortfall in financial aid is hurting racial diversity. Perhaps getting businesses to sponsor students is part of the solution, he said.

Tom Hefty argued that Wisconsin continues to spend more per capita on higher education than other Midwestern states and must do more to adapt to the new economy.

Milwaukee Area Technical College President Darnell Cole noted agreements he has worked out with UW campuses and other institutions to promote seamless transfers between campuses.

All in all, the state's institutions of higher learning must keep striving to better align themselves with the new knowledge economy. But the state Legislature must realize that it must invest in our universities to make this happen.