

Wisconsin budget to hurt students at technical colleges

Andre Damon in Madison, Wisconsin
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Among the victims of the Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's budget proposal will be technical colleges, which stand to have their state funding cut by 30 percent.

Over the past decade, enrollment in the state's technical college system has grown by 40 percent, to over 400,000 students, as the economic crisis and chronic unemployment have compelled people to seek higher education in an effort to make themselves more employable. "High unemployment is definitely one of the driving forces in the growth of enrollment at technical colleges," said Jacob Weigandt, president of the Madison Area Technical College Student Senate.

Last week, Walker announced his 2012-2013 budget proposal, which includes a nine percent cut in state aid to public education, totaling \$900 million. The proposal would cut funding for technical colleges to its lowest level since the 1980s.

Madison Area Technical College, which provides education and training to working class people of all ages and backgrounds, will be among the hardest hit. The college, which is spread over a dozen campuses, has an enrollment of over 40,000, roughly equivalent to the overall enrollment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Enrollment has swelled by 22 percent at the college in the past five years. The college has expanded its campus in response, a project that cost more than \$130 million. The college had planned on increased property taxes to finance the expansion, but Walker's budget freezes property taxes at their current levels, leaving the college in an untenable situation, said Weigandt.

While priding itself on its manageable tuition, the college has been forced to raise fees by about 5 percent per year over the past 10 years. While no further tuition increases have been announced, students suspect that they are inevitable.

Joe Connolly is a typical student at Madison Area Technical College. He was a real estate loan officer for 13 years, but when the bottom fell out of the housing market, he found himself out of work.

"Yeah, I'm a 99er," he said, referring to the colloquial term for people whose unemployment benefits have run out after 99 weeks. "I am 46 years old and find myself starting a second career." He has enrolled in the dental technician program at the college, but has spent the entire period of his unemployment on the waiting list. "I'm just taking a few get-your-feet-wet classes before going back to school," he said. "My real classes begin in a few months."

Connolly had nothing but contempt for Walker's budget. "Scott Walker wants to say the budget is broken, but he's the one who broke it. During his first week in office, he gave a \$140 million tax cut to the wealthiest businesses. Then he says the state is bankrupt."

"I used to be a mechanic, and he reminds me of some other mechanics I knew. You'd take your car in for an oil change, and they'd beat it up and say you need to pay \$2,000 to fix it. Extortion: that's what Walker is doing to the workers of this state."

“Collective bargaining is the tip of the iceberg,” Connolly added. “Walker’s entire program is designed to favor his wealthy buddies at the expense of everybody else. He wants to destroy whatever is left of the social safety net in this state.”

“Walker and his friends want to return the working class to a Dickensian existence. They want this tiny little political controlling group at the top, that’s actually controlled by the millionaires, a small middle class, and a huge working poor that shuts up and does as it’s told.”

Despite his long bout of unemployment, Connolly said he strongly supported public sector workers, who Walker has sought to vilify and target for benefit cuts. “I once thought about being a teacher; it’s not an easy job to do. Police officers, firefighters, and teachers should have the highest pay; they should have the best medical care, dental care, vision. If you commit that kind of energy and dedication to being a teacher, I take my hat off to you.”

Patrick Cadyl, 21, is a liberal arts student at the college. He said that long lines to get into education programs have become such a problem that people have started making career choices based on waiting periods for classes. “I wanted to go into the culinary school, but the waiting time was two years; that simply wasn’t possible. The nursing lines are huge, too.”

He said Walker’s cuts would significantly hurt him. “My financial aid is going to be affected, not to mention tuition; I get Stafford loans, and if they get cut, it will be very hard to make ends meet,” he said.

Cadyl recently tried to go back to the job he had before he started college—refilling vending machines for his brother-in-law’s company—but the position was no longer available anymore because the company had to cut back.

“The bill hurts every type of person. I have a brother who is disabled; he lives at home with my parents.

He’s a big sports fan, he’s been trying to find a job just to have some money to go to a game now and then. This bill will make it even harder for him to do that.”

The International Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party will be hosting a public meeting at the Madison Area Technical College on Thursday, March 10, at 2 p.m. For more information, click here.



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