

# Wisconsin budget will make higher education less accessible

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As protests by workers in Wisconsin continued at the state capitol in Madison, more details emerged on the impact of the budget plan outlined by Governor Scott Walker Tuesday night.

The two-year budget will slash \$96 million from counties and municipalities, \$900 million from local school districts, \$250 million from the state university system and \$500 million from programs that provide medical coverage for low-income families and prescriptions for seniors.

Some 1,200 jobs are to be eliminated outright, with another 20,000 outsourced. This comes on top of the Republican governor's previously announced plan to force teachers, nurses and other public employees to pay sharply increased contributions for health care and pension benefits.

Walker began touring the state on Wednesday to tout his budget and his proposal to gut public employee collective bargaining rights. In a stop in the northern Wisconsin city of Wausau, he said local officials concerned about the loss of state aid should demand even higher health care co-pays than he has proposed.

Officials from school districts and local governments across the state are making plans to close schools, lay off teachers and other workers, drastically cut back services, and reopen union contracts. While slashing more than \$500 per pupil in public school spending, Walker increased funding for charter schools and vouchers for private schools.

The governor is also proposing funding cuts and sweeping changes in the University of Wisconsin system, which serves 182,000 students statewide and employs more than 32,000 faculty and other university workers. State aid will be cut by 13 percent for UW-Madison and 11 percent for the other 12 four-year universities in Milwaukee, Green Bay, Eau Claire,

Oshkosh and other cities. Walker will also cut \$71.6 million from the state's technical college system, about 30 percent of the system's funding.

The University of Wisconsin has deep historical roots in the social and political life of the state. It is identified with the "Wisconsin Idea" of the Progressive Era, when the university helped shape social legislation, including the regulation of railroads and utilities, workers' compensation, progressive taxation, and university extension services. In 1904, the university's president, Charles Van Hise, declared that he would "never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every family in the state."

Under Walker's plan, the prestigious University of Wisconsin campus in Madison would be split off from the rest of the UW system, which would be forced to share a far smaller amount of state aid. "It's reasonable to say competition for scarce resources is going to turn up," said UW-Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells, who was among five of the UW system's 14 chancellors to oppose the breakup of the system.

The aim is to create an elite university that provides research and development for major corporations. The Madison campus, the main UW school, which currently serves 40,000 students, would be free to set its own tuition rates. Increasingly, it would be too costly for working and middle-class families.

While other UW schools expect to raise tuition 5.5 percent this year, in line with the last several years, UW-Madison Chancellor Carolyn "Biddy" Martin said tuition could be increased by as much as 15 percent in each of the next two years.

Between 2003 and 2005, the last time the UW system had a \$250 million two-year cut, tuition rose 16-18 percent annually. That was under Walker's predecessor, Democrat Jim Doyle.

The increases “would be real bad for kids struggling to get a good education,” said Bonnie Reichert, an undergraduate at Madison majoring in Landscape Engineering. “I pay \$9,000 a year now and an increase of 25 percent would make it closer to \$12,000.

“Over the last two years tuition increases have been smaller. But this would be a lot to handle. I depend on student loans to cover tuition, plus my rent, books and other fees. The federal government froze the amount on my loan for the last two years, even as costs have risen. This has caused me to pay more out-of-pocket. Because of my major, I’m in the studio doing art work a lot and I can’t get a part-time job. Once I get out, I’ll be \$40,000 to \$50,000 in debt.”

Under Walker’s plan, UW-Madison would be turned into a “public authority” and governance would shift to a Board of Trustees that would include 11 governor-appointed members—largely drawn from the corporate world. The school would also be free to set its own personnel policy—including wages and workplace conditions—for its 17,000 workers, who would no longer be employees of the state government and would be stripped of collective bargaining rights.

On Wednesday morning several hundred faculty members, administrators, teaching assistants, university employees and students attended a campus meeting to discuss the implications of Walker’s budget plan. Several workers questioned Chancellor Martin about pay cuts, the loss of accrued benefits, and transfer and collective bargaining rights. One worker bluntly asked, “Is our base pay going to be cut and our payments for benefits increased so we are the working poor?”

While acknowledging there would be “some short-term pain,” Martin promoted the governor’s plan, saying the school had to adjust to the 21st century and become a “research engine for business.” Martin, who makes a salary of \$437,000 a year, said, “It doesn’t do any of us any good if we all falter—we have to recruit and retain the greatest talent.”

Graduate student teaching assistants will be among the hardest hit. At present, they have a remission to pay tuition costs, plus a stipend of around \$1,000 a month—nine months out of the year—to cover living expenses. Once the TAs lose bargaining rights, these very limited provisions could be quickly taken away.

At a meeting of the teaching assistants Wednesday night, Jesse, a history teaching assistant, said, “I’m

very concerned. There is a strong tradition of support for higher education in this state—and that’s under threat. If UW-Madison splits off, is Eau Claire going to make it? As it is, the history department cannot guarantee funding for graduate students.

“Tuition is still relatively cheap, but it is going to change. Under the budget, Walker has eliminated funding for poor and inner city students to go to college. Everything is being slashed—we’re heading to elite education.”

Jesse said the teachers’ union in Wisconsin “gave up concessions very quickly,” and that he thought a fight was necessary.

Another TA, Gregory, said, “It’s infuriating. Walker is cutting money from the university, public schools, BadgerCare and other things. It’s going to be harder and harder for people to get a good education, and you are going to have a hierarchy of people. I’m from Maine, and they are doing it there too, also in New York with Mayor Bloomberg. We have to do something to stop it.”



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