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University chancellors: Budget proposal would hurt

By Pamela Powers
Menomonie News Bureau

MENOMONIE — Chancellors at UW-Eau Claire and UW-Stout say maintaining educational quality would prove challenging given significant budget cuts to universities proposed by a state legislative committee.

The Joint Finance Committee last week approved 11 percent cuts in state funding to UW System schools, translating to a \$250 million reduction during the next two years. The committee also approved a measure in which UW-Madison would remain part of the university system. The university had sought to leave the UW System.

"With 11 percent we'll be cutting about \$7.6 million in the next biennium," UW-Stout Chancellor Charles Sorensen said. "That will be difficult."

The cutbacks would mean no salary increases, Sorensen said, and would make it more difficult to attract and retain staff. University officials would have to delay filling vacancies and cut one-year positions, he said.

"We are not attracting the people we would like to and we're losing people," he said

Under the proposal about \$12 million would be cut at UW-Eau Claire during the next two years, Chancellor Brian Levin-Stankevich said. That would mean vacant positions would not be filled next school year, he said, and it remains to be seen what would be cut the following year.

"It's going to affect the scope of what we can do," Levin-Stankevich said. "We're going to try not to let it affect the quality (of what) we do. (But) it makes it hard to maintain and meet the expectations of the students and parents."

The Joint Finance Committee's proposal now goes to the state Legislature for inclusion in the 2011-13 state budget. Legislators could change the measure, but it appears likely to be approved given a Republican legislative majority. Many legislators have said state budget woes make cuts to university spending a necessity.

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The committee recommendation would give universities more freedom regarding personnel and property decisions and provide leaders a block grant that would allow universities to keep money saved through cost-saving measures. Sorensen, Levin-Stankevich and other chancellors have sought greater freedom from some UW System regulations.

However, the committee's proposal would not allow universities to set tuition, a move Levin-Stankevich and Sorensen said unduly limits their institutions' ability to make up for lost state aid.

"Tuition is the only option we have to get more money and unfortunately that is out," Sorensen said.

Levin-Stankevich said the proposal does not allow each university flexibility in capital construction, benefits or buying decisions, changes that would have helped have helped deal with state aid reductions.

"We need flexibility because we're no longer a publicly funded institution," he said, adding that the state now pays for less than 25 percent of public universities' expenses.

Sorensen said reducing state funding to the state's universities and technical colleges could hamper Wisconsin economic development.

"We're going to try to sell it so people understand we are a major player, an engine, to help the economy," Sorensen said.

Powers can be reached at 715-556-9018 or pamela.powers@ecpc.com.