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## ***Editorial***

December 12, 2008

### **University can serve as engine for recovery**

**By Kevin P. Reilly**

As President-elect Obama acknowledged in his election-night speech, our country is facing some of the greatest financial challenges in our lifetimes. The next Congress will make difficult decisions about where to invest and where to cut. Leaders in Wisconsin face similarly vexing questions, as Governor Doyle anticipates a \$5.4-billion shortfall for the upcoming two-year budget cycle.

The simple reality: We're all going to have to do more with less.

For years, the University of Wisconsin System has been doing more for our students with less public support. At our four-year campuses, taxpayers today invest \$500 less per student than they did 10 years ago, at a level that is now \$1,500 below the national average. Still, we've increased enrollment by 11 percent over the decade, to an all-time high of 173,393 students. Our campuses conferred 32,433 degrees last year—another record, and a 21 percent improvement over the decade.

To achieve these gains, we have boosted retention and graduation rates and eased transfer opportunities, while reducing the number of credits necessary for students to complete their degree programs. We've done all of this while keeping the UW System's administrative costs among the lowest in the nation.

This is not enough. To serve both Wisconsin students and the whole state, the UW System is:

- Creating room for more students and offering students ways to finish their degrees faster.
- Enrolling more working adults, providing flexible learning opportunities, including accelerated and weekend courses.
- Helping young people prepare for college by working with the Wisconsin Covenant and the KnowHow2GO campaign.
- Expanding transfer opportunities, so students can take advantage of course offerings available on all UW campuses.
- Keeping college affordable by advocating for public and private investments in need-based financial aid.

At a time when families are struggling to pay the increased costs of basics such as food and healthcare, some are questioning whether higher education is a necessity. I'd argue that it's a vital engine of growth in our state and our country.

The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that in four years, 3 million more jobs will require bachelor's degrees, and there won't be enough graduates to fill them; 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs, 60 percent of all new jobs, and 40 percent of manufacturing jobs will require some education beyond high school. Yet in Wisconsin, just 25 percent of adults have four-year degrees. That's less than our national average and far behind leading nations like Japan, Canada, and South Korea.

Wisconsin isn't alone. The United States needs to produce 16 million more college graduates by 2025 to match today's leading industrialized nations.

To reach this goal, our nation can do a number of things. For example, the federal financial aid system must be overhauled, simplifying a difficult process that intimidates many eligible students. We must give students the tools they need to enroll in college and succeed once they get there. Finally, we must commit to reestablishing our research preeminence, creating more home-grown scientific talent that can lead the way to new discoveries.

For long-term success, we need a smart, innovative, highly-skilled workforce. In this economic climate, we must ensure that the UW has the support to grow that workforce, thereby serving as a core engine of recovery and renewal.

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*Kevin P. Reilly is president of the University of Wisconsin System.*

**Media Contact**

David Giroux  
608-262-4464