DATE: October 11, 2023

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development and Technical Colleges

FROM: UW System Office of Government Relations

RE: Written Testimony in support of Special Session Senate Bill 1

Thank you, Chair Feyen and committee members, for giving the UW System (UWS) an opportunity to provide testimony in favor of the September 2023 Special Session Senate Bill 1 (SE3 SB1).

UW System supports the increased investment this legislation will provide our 13 universities to support developing Wisconsin's workforce and the infrastructure funds to construct the UW-Madison engineering building.

Wisconsin's workforce shortage is one of the top issues facing our state today. If Wisconsin can't meet current workforce demand, then Wisconsin jobs that can be moved out of state will be and will never return. Jobs that cannot be moved out of state (such as educators and health care workers), will remain unfilled, contributing to less accessibility and lower quality in these critical fields. Wisconsin is in a war for talent and with future state investment, our universities are well-positioned to assist in addressing these demographic changes.

Our universities offer a critical talent pipeline for Wisconsin business, meeting workforce needs for every region of the state. Nearly 161,000 students are trained at our schools and 37,000 graduate annually. Yet, to meet the needs of Wisconsin, we must grow these numbers by addressing participation rates (increasing the number of individuals who go onto higher education), providing greater access to those who wish to reskill, upskill, or finish a degree, and increasing the number of students we bring to our universities from other states or internationally. The UW System strategic plan includes metrics to achieve these goals, including increasing the number of UW graduates by 10% to 41,000 individuals by 2028. Additional state support would assist campuses throughout the state in ensuring access and expanding capacity to deliver graduates to address high demand workforce needs.

Our universities are positioned to cultivate the talent of individuals who call Wisconsin home and attract new talent to the state. Our universities produce graduates to fill the jobs of today and train the students who will create the jobs of tomorrow. Our universities constantly examine and adjust program offerings to match current workforce demands. Currently, nearly 40% of our students are graduating with high demand STEM and health care degrees. That is a 30% increase over the past 10 years, displaying our continuous focus on meeting market demand.

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With continued investment we can further grow offerings in high demand fields including nursing, health care, data and computer science, business and finance, and engineering.

The state can also increase the number of engineering graduates in Wisconsin by enumerating and funding the engineering building at UW-Madison. The updated facility would provide UW-Madison's College of Engineering a flexible and modern space that would allow for an increase of at least 1,000 undergraduate and 500 graduate students, as well as support and facilitate world-class engineering research. This project has significant private donor investment, and additional support from the state would help UW-Madison address a growing workforce shortage and produce research that drives economic growth.

We have a shared goal of creating the best future for Wisconsin and can be a strong partner in continuing to address the challenges facing our state. Our universities have been and will continue to be an asset to addressing Wisconsin’s workforce needs. Our universities, if properly funded, will ensure Wisconsin has a vibrant and thriving economy for years to come. The investments we make today will define Wisconsin’s future.

Thank you again for your consideration of this legislation.