

DATE: January 8, 2026

TO: Members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities

FROM: Julie Gordon, Interim Vice President for Finance and Administration

RE: Testimony in Opposition to Assembly Bill 545

Thank you, Chair Murphy, Vice-Chair Nedweski, and committee members for providing the Universities of Wisconsin (UWs) an opportunity to testify in opposition to Assembly Bill 545 (AB 545).

The 13 fully accredited Universities of Wisconsin seek to be on the forefront of delivering distance education courses. The evolution of higher education and new technologies has allowed our universities to educate thousands of students in Wisconsin and beyond, through high-quality, innovative and transformative online learning experiences.

AB 545 seeks to ensure that students are not charged additional fees beyond what is necessary for courses offered exclusively online. We appreciate and support the bill's intent to protect students from unnecessary costs and promote transparency in pricing.

At the same time, we want to acknowledge that the current landscape of online course fees across our universities is not uniform. While some fees are clearly tied to the real costs of delivering high quality online education, such as instructional technology, technical support, software development, and faculty training, others may appear arbitrary or inconsistent. We recognize this concern and are actively working to improve clarity and reduce fees where possible as our educational delivery evolves.

However, an immediate prohibition on these revenue sources could have unintended consequences. It may limit our universities' ability to offer flexible, high-quality online options, especially for students who rely on these formats due to work, family, or geographic constraints. Online education is not cost-free, and maintaining academic rigor in virtual environments requires ongoing investment.

The Board of Regents has delegated authority to each university to establish special course fees under SYS Policy 825. Many institutions have adopted service-based pricing models that are self-sustaining and not reliant on general purpose revenue (GPR). This flexibility allows campuses to support online programs responsibly while continuing to meet student needs.

We believe the Universities of Wisconsin are well-positioned to deliver cost-effective, high-quality online education. We welcome continued collaboration to ensure that fees are fair, transparent, and aligned with actual costs without compromising access or quality for students.

(Cont.)

Thank you again for providing the Universities of Wisconsin the opportunity to testify on this legislation.