

## Update on the UW System Response to COVID-19

---

Remarks by UW System President Ray Cross to the Board of Regents  
April 2, 2020

I am grateful to have the opportunity for us to come together today, albeit in an unconventional manner. At a time when physical separation is the order of the day, we all need connections now more than ever – even if they are virtual.

These are extraordinary times. No one needs to tell you that. We each have our own ways of keeping the fear and anxiety at bay in order to keep moving forward.

We all have enormous gratitude for all those on the front lines of this crisis, the healthcare providers, the emergency personnel, and so many others who are literally putting their own lives at risk to help others.

An immediate concern for all of us at this time is also our UW family ... our students, our faculty and staff, our colleagues, our communities. Individually and collectively, we are facing enormous pressures and challenges as a result of this pandemic.

As we lead the UW System and our institutions through these unprecedented times, we will each face difficult decisions. These decisions are necessary to ensure the UW System's commitment to serving every corner of this state is fulfilled – whether that is students who learn from us, faculty and staff who directly serve those students, or our neighbors who benefit from our impact on local communities and economies.

The UW System will continue to search for truth and work to improve the human condition – especially now. We are here to serve.

That said, I recognize the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are far-reaching and touch every aspect of our institutions. But it will not impact our ability to live out the Wisconsin Idea.

As you know, we have been strategically planning for enrollment and financial challenges through 2026. We had hoped to incrementally and thoughtfully make changes to our institutions in response to changing demographics and projected financial conditions.

Obviously, much of that has changed. Now, we may have to move more quickly to adjust to our dramatically changing environment.

This morning, I would like to address some of what we're doing in the UW System to keep moving forward, what we have already done, and what we're planning to do.

I have several main areas I would like to address:

- Teaching and learning;
- Budget and finances;
- Federal and state actions;
- And what's next.

First, to our students, faculty, and staff, who are at the core of who we are and what we do – **teaching and learning**. Thank you for your resilience, your persistence, and your commitment.

It has been one of our highest priorities to continue to provide our students with the University of Wisconsin education they want and need – while also doing everything possible to keep our students, faculty, staff, and colleagues healthy and safe.

We are now doing many things differently, but the University of Wisconsin System institutions remain open. I want to repeat that – every UW institution remains OPEN. I have been enormously

gratified and proud of the work being done by so many people at all of our institutions and at the System level to make this possible.

While all of our institutions have offered online instruction for quite some time, to move all instruction to alternative methods – especially on such short notice – has been extraordinarily ambitious and challenging. Not exactly how most people would have expected to spend their spring breaks!

With classes now starting to resume after spring break, students will be engaging with their professors and other teaching and support staff – as well as each other – in new ways. Will there be bumps? Of course. Do we know how it will all turn out? Of course not. But I am confident that we have the right people and the personal commitment to make this successful.

I should note it is especially imperative that we provide all necessary support to enable students who have been planning to graduate at the end of this semester the opportunity and means to do just that. Our faculty have pledged to make that happen. Impressive.

To further keep our people healthy and safe, we suspended current study abroad programs and recalled students to the United States. We cancelled athletic travel and all non-essential university travel. Our employees, whenever possible, are now working remotely from home.

So, let me repeat. We might be doing things differently, but the University of Wisconsin System institutions remain open.

Second, **budget and finances**. The costs of the COVID-19 disease are just starting to come in, and one of the few things we know for sure is that the full costs will not be known for some time. We will continue to track these unbudgeted costs to keep our shared mission of providing every student the opportunity to attend our exceptional campuses.

That said, our initial analysis indicates that the financial impact of this pandemic is significantly greater than anything I have seen in my 42 years in higher education. Obviously, COVID-19 is directly impacting current housing, dining, and other auxiliary operations. It is also impacting research and other associated services. It is likely to significantly reduce summer revenues and it will also likely impact the 2020-21 academic year.

Our decision to transition our teaching platforms to alternative delivery methods, largely online, was a necessary step. As a result, we will be providing prorated refunds to students and families for the funds they would otherwise have paid for room and board for the remainder of spring semester.

We recognize, however, this presents a significant financial cost for all of us. We're estimating the refunded fees alone could reach \$78 million across the System. Yes, it was still the right thing to do – but it has serious consequences.

Even before the current emergency, all of our campuses were working tirelessly to increase our enrollment numbers to deal with demographic challenges. It was urgent before – and is even more so now. I know all of the Chancellors will continue to aggressively work with their recruiting teams and advance their retention efforts.

On the **federal** front, we have been in close and frequent contact with members of our Wisconsin delegation, as well as national organizations for higher education, keeping them apprised of what we're doing and the rapidly changing and growing impact of the pandemic on our students, our operations, and our future.

Along with our Chancellors and their staffs, we are also keeping them informed of the work we are doing to respond to COVID-19 and the urgent need for our students and institutions to receive relief in an emergency supplemental funding bill.

Late last week, a third COVID-19 bill was passed by Congress and signed by the President. It includes a **\$30.75 billion** Education Stabilization Fund to provide emergency support to local school systems and higher education institutions to continue to provide educational services to their students and to support the ongoing functionality of school districts and institutions of higher education.

Based on data provided by our national higher education organizations, we estimate this federal support will provide \$47 million in emergency grants for our students and \$47 million in institutional support.

As these funds are distributed, it will be a powerful down payment to help with the University's most immediate challenges and needs. We are very appreciative of the federal assistance, as well as several important areas of regulatory relief that have been provided.

I want to express my immense gratitude to our UW System colleagues, the higher education community at-large, and Wisconsin's congressional delegation for recognizing the need – and going to work for our students, faculty, staff, and institutions across Wisconsin.

On the state front, we have submitted a preliminary request for state assistance. The request includes allocations to provide IT support for the move to alternative delivery methods to fulfill our mission, student support related to both behavioral health and practicum completion, and institutional aid that will help stabilize our campuses. We will continue to monitor and work with our partners at the state level to ensure our students have the best possible outcomes in this new environment.

We should remember, however, that we will continue to face lost revenues and increased costs at our campuses, and those numbers continue to grow day by day.

We anticipate that there will be the need for additional supplemental legislation and will continue to analyze UW System needs and work with our federal and state colleagues to support higher education.

I want to pause here. This economic hit is not just impacting universities. It is to every family in the country.

However, every one of our institutions is a key economic stabilizing force in our respective communities. Whether in Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, Madison, Menominee, Milwaukee, Oshkosh, Parkside, Platteville, River Falls, Stevens Point, Superior, or Whitewater – we are a major employer in every community and overall one of the largest employers in the state. Stabilizing the university helps to stabilize the economy in each of these communities.

Further, we are critically important to the economic “restart” once the period of self-isolation ends – which it will do – and protecting our future. To do so, we will need continued support from our federal allies, state allies, and private partners.

So, **what’s next?**

The truth is, we don’t know what’s next. Nobody does. The past is not a good predictor of the future in this case. We are living in an evolving time with many gray areas. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t start planning for what *could* be next. Our planning discussions have focused on three separate timeframes and an array of questions, most of them without answers.

Broadly, during the first timeframe from the present to June 1:

- We are collecting and analyzing the costs directly connected to the virus and the disease it causes;

- We are working hard to make sure students who were scheduled to graduate in May will be able to do so;
- We are communicating with our federal and state officials to help them understand the impact and importance of the university in helping the state and the country emerge from this pandemic;
- We will be assessing and evaluating “predictors” as indicators of future challenges, such as economic indicators, progression of the virus, application activity within and outside our university system, and feedback information from current students;
- We will be developing plans and preparing for a variety of potential challenges for the summer timeframe;
- We will be assessing the financial impact and condition of each campus; and
- We will begin the process of scenario planning for the fall semester based on an array of assumptions informed by these indicators which, of course, will continue to change over the next 60 days.

During the second period or timeframe, from June 1 to the middle of August, we will have developed scenario plans based on the best information available. We hope to have that information assembled by July 1.

During the third period, after fall classes have started, we will look to make adjustments and respond to new information and data as it is made known.

It's important to remember we are all in this together. And that means the UW System, its institutions, and our people, are joining in efforts to get Wisconsin through this emergency. This is our state. These are our communities. In a whole new interpretation of the Wisconsin Idea, we are offering our resources and our expertise to assist wherever possible.

UW System Administration and all of our institutions are working with emergency operations centers, both locally and statewide, to provide whatever assistance we can during the crisis. Residence halls and other facilities at many of our campuses may be made available to use as potential hospital overflow rooms or to provide rooms for medical personnel who cannot return home at this time.

The UW-Madison School of Pharmacy, for one, is stepping up to help produce hand sanitizer for UW Health.

UW-Milwaukee has joined a special task force, the Milwaukee MaskForce, to make reusable, medical-grade respirator masks.

Our institutions are donating available personal protective equipment (PPE) to area healthcare workers, helping to create more face shields, and donating supplies to make thousands of COVID-19 test kits.

We are assisting in other ways as well. Education students at UW-Oshkosh, for example, are offering free, online tutoring for K-12 students now learning at home. Students at some other campuses are providing childcare for health workers who are away from their families.

And, of course, our UW researchers are doing what they're so well known for – applying their expertise to help find solutions to our world's largest problems – in this case, working to develop vital treatments and vaccines for COVID-19.

This, of course, is just a very small sampling of things we're doing. I am very proud of how we have stepped up to do our part, in ways both big and small. That IS the Wisconsin Idea in action.

A special note to our students: You are and will continue to be our most important order of business. You are our future – and we want nothing more than to have you succeed and thrive. Despite these very challenging times, we remain committed to helping you do that.

And to our amazing faculty and staff... You have responded so tremendously that I am almost at a loss for words. Your “can do” attitude and your commitment to carry on in support of our students are truly magnificent.

To close, let me just say: Be safe, everyone, be kind, be patient, and stay engaged. We will get through this and we will be a better university.