



**Remarks to the Board of Regents
by President Ray Cross**

Retirement Comments
October 8, 2020

Thank you and good afternoon members of the Board of Regents, colleagues and friends.

Thank you so much for those kind words.

Well, I officially retired September 30th. So, I have been retired for a little over a week now. I cannot say that I share Francis Wayland's relief after his retirement from Brown University in 1855 after twenty-eight years as their President. When he heard the bell ring that signaled the opening of classes that fall, he told a friend, "*No one can conceive the unspeakable relief and freedom which I feel at this moment, to hear that bell ring, and to know, for the first time in nearly twenty-nine years, that it calls me to no duty.*"¹ Yes, I feel some relief when the alarm rings goes off in the

¹ Hofstadter, Richard, and Walter P. Dewitt Hardy. 1952. *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press.

early morning hours but it is not “unspeakable relief” nor does a sense of “freedom roll” over me but rather a sense of pride and comfort. I will explain why in a few minutes.

I have organized my remarks around some of my broad observations. Observations about university communities, about the purpose of a university education, about university leadership and then some specific recommendations for the future of the university system and the State of Wisconsin. First, some observations about university communities.

Observations about university “communities”

We often refer to the university as a “community.” Sometimes we refer to it as a “community of learners.” But today, I suggest, we are no longer a community. **Communities** might be more descriptive because there are many of them within a modern university. We are a pluralistic society with multiple cultures, multiple identities, and multiple agendas and of course, our

universities reflect our society. This places enormous strain on our ability to mediate and engage each of those communities effectively. Coexistence is often more likely than unity. At times we even seem to be at least partially at war within our so-called community. Unlike some, I actually believe this is good – it is really challenging for institutional leaders and university boards but at a time when America is so polarized, so tribal, so hostile and so fragmented with few things around which we can be unified, the university offers hope because this is where the relentless pursuit of truth is job one; where we strive to bring agreement out of disagreements, to mediate differences in a civil and objective manner, where important primary values (both individual and societal) emerge from vigorous debate and dialogue; where opinions are challenged, dismissed or validated through research, science and data; and, a place where intellectual freedom is greatly prized and carefully protected. All of which make the university the perfect place for a pluralistic society to engage in the process of building a more inclusive,

more humane, more engaged, more just democratic society.

From the varying demands that political forces place upon us, to the conflicting demands around the past, present, and the future of the university as well as the disputes over our purpose, we are institutions in a constant state of turmoil and sometimes chaos.

That is by design. This should be an environment where ideas, beliefs and values are exchanged, debated, questioned, and vetted without fear or intimidation. Confrontation can get messy.

But that environment is necessary if we are to fulfill our purpose, our mission.

Thus, I encourage this Board to continue to embrace and support this important role for the UW institutions. Be patient with us while we attempt to effectively engage and strive to better understand and serve our many diverse communities within the greater university community. Just know we are in our element and this is where it should happen.

Let me now share some observations about our purpose.

Observations about the purpose of a university education

Today, as polls show, the public generally values higher education less than they did just a few years ago. I believe that is in part because we either have not effectively defined the purpose of a university education or we have muddied it in such a way as to make it difficult to understand. Before we can address the declining value of higher education generally, we must internally, as leaders of a major university system ourselves, answer this question more clearly, *what is the purpose of a University of Wisconsin education? What is learning for?* For only when we more crisply define our purpose can we craft the strategies and actions needed to fulfill that purpose. Ironically, it seems that as we have strived to make education more efficient and more responsive to the interests of students, we may have ignored the most important question – why are we here, what is our purpose, what are we trying to accomplish? Efficiency and student interest are technical responses or answers about means, not ends and

they offer no pathway to a consideration of our educational philosophy – what is our purpose. And, as Postman argues, focusing on efficiency and student interest blocks the way to such a consideration by beginning with the question of HOW we should proceed rather than with the question of WHY we should proceed.²

Many of you have heard me speak about what I consider the four primary purposes of a university education. These are much more complex and nuanced than I will express here but in their most simple form, they are: First, understanding one's self (who am I and why am I here). Second, understanding how I fit into my community (how do I effectively live and work with others). Third, understanding my role in sustaining and improving a democracy. And, finally, developing an ability to participate in the economy (to work or create work and be compensated) without which the first three become increasingly difficult. Unfortunately, too much of

² Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Knopf, 1992. P.

the American public believes the only purpose of higher education is to prepare graduates for a job or a career but that should be only one part of our purpose.

Additionally, within the UW System, we believe our mission goes beyond the basic personal development of these four purposes.

We believe the university also needs to identify itself with the welfare of the state, that every person, every business, every community in the state needs to directly and indirectly benefit from the work of the university. We call that the Wisconsin Idea and that is what inspires our mission, our calling, and our purpose.

Thus, I respectfully encourage this Board to continue to support the broader role and purposes of a UW education and regularly debate and question what we are doing to fulfill our purpose – our mission. We need to make our mission, our purpose front and center always.

Given the challenges our universities face serving multiple communities and the disputes over our purpose, I think it appropriate that I should share some observations about university leadership.

Observations about university leadership today

I must start this with an observation from someone I really admired, Bart Giamatti. Bart Giamatti, left the Presidency at Yale to become the Commissioner of Major League Baseball, and subsequently remarked that the job of a college president was “*a mid-nineteenth century ecclesiastical position on top of a late-twentieth-century corporation.*”³ An outspoken critic of Harvard’s early president Charles Eliott, who wrote under a pseudonym for fear of retaliation, suggested that the president,

*Presides over a tropical jungle ...full of queer
animals...some run about, seeking whom they may devour.*

³ Thorp, Holden and Goldstein, Buck, “Our Higher Calling.” The University of North Carolina Press, 2018, p74

*Others sit quietly in corners, shrinking from observation, searching curiously for unknown thingsit is a vast, magnificent, historic tangle. About all that the mighty gentleman can do, is to stand on a height above it and **squirt perfume on the ensemble.** ⁴*

Yes, at times it seems all we do is “squirt perfume” but I contend that some presidents and chancellors actually do that much better than others!

Early university presidents like Charles Elliot at Harvard, Andrew White at Cornell, James (Angel) Angell at Michigan, and William Harper at the University of Chicago just to name a few, were able to move their mostly “unified communities” through the sheer power of their position. The institutions they led principally served the elite. They were more unified in their understanding of the

⁴ Somnia Vana, “College Education: An Inquest; Part II,” Freeman, March 1, 1992, p.584

purpose of their institutions. Most believed, like Plato, that the purpose of higher education was to produce philosopher kings.

While these early higher ed leaders were giants they led their institutions in many ways like just as European Rectors led their universities – in collaboration with the faculty. Eliot cautioned that the president should be an inventing and animating force, and often a leader, but not a ruler or autocrat. Their success will be due more to power of exposition and persuasion combined with persistent industry, than to any force of will or habit of command.⁵

Former President Eisenhower struggled with this greatly during his short tenure as President of Columbia University. A biographer observed that he could not command, he had to persuade. He could not rely on discipline he had to rely on argument, discussion and free will.⁶

⁵ James, Henry. 1930. *Charles W. Eliot*. 2 vols. London: Constable

⁶ Gunther, John. 1952. *Eisenhower: The Man and the Symbol*, London: Hamish Hamilton. pp. 99-100,103

Part of the heritage at the University of Wisconsin is deeply rooted in the leadership of Charles Van Hise. It was said that he, like Eliot at Harvard, was sometimes tactless, and blunt and apt to be ponderous, but he could be very persuasive. So persuasive, in fact, that prior to his death in 1918, a Milwaukee paper felt he had transformed the university into “a university that rules the state.” He exercised authority in the context of faculty participation. He was a persuasive, persistent and patient university leader – not an autocrat. Obviously, that is not always possible, especially today when institutions consist of so many different communities, have so many different agendas, and are not as unified in their support of the university mission as they were in the early 1900’s. Yet, the impact and legacy of Van Hise’s leadership continues to cast a long and influential shadow on the University and on the entire state of Wisconsin.⁷

⁷ Vance, Maurice M. 1960. *Charles Van Hise*. Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society.

When you consider the formative leadership styles of the early leaders on all our UW campuses and the influence they had on our current operations, you gain a better understanding of how and why our System is so highly respected. Within that context, our Chancellors today must navigate the complexity of our diverse communities, the disputes over our purpose, and the complex challenges facing higher education and the nation while trying to manage multimillion dollar budgets, serve their communities, recruit and retain talent, manage the impact of a pandemic, and do so while under scrutiny from critics hiding within the “historic tropical jungles” described by Eliot’s critic. Yes, these are difficult jobs. Yes, the University needs to adapt and change. But, leaders who bring the university through needed change should be encouraged to do so through persuasion in the tradition of Van Hise and with patience in the tradition of Sorensen at Stout and with persistence in the tradition of Zimpher at Milwaukee. University leaders that are **persuasive**, that are **persistent**, and

that have **patience** (the three P's as I call them) will have a lasting impact on their institutions and on the state.

Thus, I encourage the Board to continue to seek out university leaders who can effectively lead their institutions and this great system to make wise changes using persuasion, persistence, and patience.

Speaking of change. I also have some

Observations about needed UW System changes

While we have been working on several of the following ten recommendations, much more work needs to be done and some of these recommendations need to be addressed more quickly than others.

First, the UW comprehensive campuses each need to become more distinctive, more differentiated and less duplicative.

Second, the UW System needs to continue working to consolidate and streamline administrative operational functions.

Third, the UW System needs to create a unified strategic online educational delivery model.

Fourth, the UW System needs bonding authority for non-state funded program revenue projects, and it needs to be able to borrow against projected future cash flows during times of crisis.

Fifth, the distribution of tuition dollars within the reciprocity agreement with Minnesota needs to be changed. The current arrangement shifts significant Minnesota tuition dollars directly into the state's general fund – not to the university.

Sixth, the UW System needs a comprehensive strategy to better serve underrepresented populations.

Seventh, the UW System needs a rational tuition policy.

Eighth, the faculty and staff within the UW System need a rational process for market compensation adjustments.

Ninth, the entire UW System needs a modern comprehensive end-to-end integrated enterprise management software system that will allow more effective operation of the individual institutions and the entire university system.

Tenth, the State of Wisconsin needs to create a Community and Technical College System like almost every other state in the nation through the merger of the former UW Colleges and the Wisconsin Technical Colleges.

So, I encourage the Board to consider these recommendations carefully and to engage the Chancellors, faculty and staff in dialogue and debate around these ideas and recommendations.

Now to the “thank you’s” I owe to so many:

Board. First, I want to thank each of you, the members of the Board for placing your trust in me. For freely sharing your wise

counsel; for holding me and the entire leadership with the university accountable; for sharing your ideas and dreams for this incredible University system and for caring so deeply about the university, our faculty, our staff, our students, and our alumni. That means so much to all of us who strive to make this university better every day. Thank you!! Thank you!!

Board Presidents. Second, I want to specifically thank the Board Presidents with whom I have worked during my tenure as President. Mike Falbo, who was President when I was hired (yes, you can blame him), Regina Millner, John Behling, and of course, Drew Petersen. My thanks to each of you for your counsel, your patience, and your thoughtful encouragement. Each of you have contributed greatly to my professional growth and to the advancement of the University of Wisconsin System.

Chancellors. Within the first year of my presidency, we had to fill five chancellor positions. We hired some outstanding leaders. In the following years, we hired three more chancellors and they too have been outstanding. I want to thank all of the chancellors for their support, their counsel, and their commitment to working together to build a stronger system. They are outstanding leaders. You can trust them to do what's best for their institution – all of them. I will certainly miss working with them and I will miss their friendship.

Faculty and Staff. The UW faculty and staff on all of our campuses and within our extension operation are just outstanding. They work hard, they are creative, they are engaged, and they care deeply about this university. They are the heart and soul of the university. They don't always understand administration (pause) and they don't always agree with our decisions (pause) ...but, they believe in the power of education, the value of the educational process, they

understand the value and importance of the university, they believe in the role and importance of research, they believe this wonderful state, Wisconsin, is their home, and they care deeply about their students.

I also want to give a special thank you to those who served in my final Cabinet and the wonderful staff within the UW System Administration. Specifically, **Anny Morrobel-Sosa, Rob Cramer, Sean Nelson, Jack Jablonski, Gary Bennett, Jess Lathrop, David Volz, Jeff Buhrandt, Shenita Brokenburr, David Brukart, Quinn Williams**, and of course, **Nicole Sment**. Thank you for helping me in so many ways and for all the debates, laughs and fun we had working together. I am immensely proud of all that we have accomplished together. Thank you. You are the best! I will miss each of you.

Of course, there is never a good time to leave the place and the people you love. But, I am, not leaving with a sense of “unspeakable relief” or of “freedom” as Francis Wayland

suggested but with a sense of comfort and pride. I have participated in just about every morning meeting of the Governor's COVID-19 Operations Group and I believe the Board could not have found anyone better to lead this wonderful system through these very difficult times than Governor Thompson. He is doing an outstanding job! The leadership of the university is in good hands.

Finally, I would like to publicly thank my wife, my partner of 52 years and my four kids. I would not be here without them and I love them dearly. Further, I hope to spend more time with all of them and especially with my eight grandchildren. Look out kids' grandpa is coming!

Hemingway thought "retirement" was the ugliest word in the English language. I differ. There is no beginning without an end, no day without night, no life without death. Our whole life consists of the difference, the space between beginning and ending. It is what lies in between that we call life and experience. I believe that

time and time again we need to be prepared to keep bringing things to an end in order to feel the magic of new beginnings and to make the most of opportunities.

I hope that historians will say that I did more than “squirt perfume on the ensemble” but if not, I hope they at least say I did that well. With that I bring my remarks to an end and bid you all farewell. I wish you, this great university system and this wonderful state all the best. Thank you.