Education leaders share challenging fiscal environment

It was no surprise at the Milwaukee Business Journal's Education CEO Roundtable held last month that leaders of the area's colleges and universities shared the same headaches: Student debt, rising expenses and ballooning tuition costs were the topics that led much of the conversation.

As the 14 leaders from Wisconsin's higher education institutions acknowledged similar problems, most said that addressing these issues require schools to constantly engage in a delicate balancing act.

For private institutions, there's the question of how much can they increase tuition to keep up with rising costs without burdening students too much — while also rewarding faculty and staff who excel. And for public universities in Wisconsin — which have experienced an undergraduate tuition freeze for the past four years that will continue through the 2017-18 academic year — leaders say it's a matter of becoming more operationally efficient to reduce costs and creating an operation budget that's sustainable in an increasingly challenging fiscal environment.

But sometimes that means cutting staff and slashing programs that students and communities have grown accustomed to.

"There are expectations that our community has for us about being out in the community or inviting them into our community and we are working very hard to be able to maintain that with fewer staff people," said Jackie Joseph-Silverstein, regional executive officer and dean at UW Colleges-Southeast Region.

Investment in online courses, however, may be a viable path for universities looking to keep expenses in line, said Mike Lovell, president of Marquette University in Milwaukee.

"Where can we grow in areas where we can keep costs down? I think it's pretty clear that if you've been paying attention to what's been going on around the country that online education is something we all have to take very seriously," Lovell said.

For Daniel Johnson, president of Wisconsin Lutheran College, Wauwatosa, one of the biggest issues facing higher education is that there is a segment of the U.S. population that is questioning the value of a college
degree.

“I think it’s a skewed story that is impacting how people view the value of our contributions for the citizenry, and I think it’s a huge problem that we have,” Johnson said.

Another major issue for Wisconsin institutions is demographics. The state's population is aging and older employees are exiting the workforce, but it’s not being replenished at the same rate with new, younger workers. Ensuring that schools in the University of Wisconsin System can address this talent pipeline issue is critical, said Dave Brukardt, associate vice president of UW System.

"What we're seeing as we are going around the state is the fact that in some regards we're at a crossroads," Brukardt said. "The demographics in the state are shifting... We're really trying to understand what the workforce needs to be going forward and how we prepare those individuals to serve in the 21st century."

ROUNDTABLE ROSTER

Fourteen leaders participated in the Nov. 8 Milwaukee Business Journal Education CEO Roundtable.

Dave Brukardt, UW System
Susan Elrod, UW-Whitewater
Deborah Ford, UW-Parkside
David Garcia, Carthage College
Daniel Johnson, Wisconsin Lutheran College
Jackie Joseph-Silvester, UW Colleges-Southeast Region
Mike Lovell, Marquette University
Vicki Martin, Milwaukee Area Technical College
Mark Mone, UW-Milwaukee
John Raymond Sr., Medical College of Wisconsin
Cathy Sandeen, UW Colleges/UW Extension
Eileen Schwalbach, Mount Mary University
Jeff Senese, Cardinal Stritch University
John Walz, Milwaukee School of Engineering

THEY SAID IT

Soft skills, social media dominate discussion

“There’s this ridiculous questioning of the value of a college degree today that I think is going to be an issue that we’re all going to be contending with.” — Daniel Johnson, Wisconsin Lutheran College

“When you think about what the growth market is for higher education, it’s not traditional students. The challenge is maintaining the quality (online).” — Mike Lovell, Marquette University

“Gone are the days when (donors) would give a million dollars at the discretion of the chancellor. It’s for a particular purpose.” — Jackie Joseph-Silvester, UW Colleges-Southeast Region

“One comment that we’ve heard from employers is ‘soft skills’ — skill sets that employers say they definitely need.” — Vicki Martin, Milwaukee Area Technical College
“We all need social media now to create a message but you’ve got to be careful with each of those channels and know how to use those channels.” — Jeff Senese, Cardinal Stritch University

Melanie Lawder
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Milwaukee Business Journal