

Our Views: Cuts to UW threaten to go too far

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By Gazette Editorial Board

Gov. Scott Walker is pitching his proposal to cut—“that’s right, cut,” as Walker said in his State of the State address—tuition at UW schools as something new, and it took even Republican lawmakers by surprise.

But lawmakers would be disingenuous to suggest that cutting tuition is substantially different from freezing it, as lawmakers have done the past four years.

While tuition hasn’t declined in nominal terms since 2013, it’s fallen when measured against inflation—and more dramatically when considering that tuition costs had historically risen at about twice the rate of inflation.

In the 10 years before Walker implemented the freeze, for example, UW-Madison tuition for Wisconsin residents rose from \$5,866 in 2004-05 to \$10,403 in 2013-14. At that rate, UW-Madison tuition would be about \$13,000 today. Instead, tuition still hovers near \$10,403.

When Walker talks about cutting tuition, lawmakers and their constituents must realize freezing tuition is actually cutting it in inflation-adjusted terms.

The four-year freeze has reduced concerns about college affordability (at least compared to other states’ college systems) but has amplified concerns about the effects of perpetual penny pinching. Lawmakers implemented the freeze in response to revelations that the UW System was sitting on nearly \$1 billion in cash reserves, and they forced UW campuses to become more efficient through both the tuition freeze and cuts to state funding.

The state’s two-year schools, including UW-Rock County, consolidated some operations and did their part to reduce administrative costs.

But now the question becomes whether lawmakers have gone too far. Any additional cuts to state funding, or even a failure to increase funding, could prove disastrous for some campuses, especially those with declining enrollments.

So far, UW officials have reserved judgment about Walker’s proposed tuition cut because they’re waiting to see the details when Walker unveils his 2017-19 budget next month.

“I can’t really say what effect it would have because I don’t know the full equation,” Charles Clark, UW-Colleges southwestern regional officer and dean, told The Gazette. He oversees three UW campuses: Rock County, Richland Center and Baraboo.

The next budget could represent a turning point for the UW System, which is asking for a \$42.5 million funding increase. If campuses don’t receive it, we’re likely to hear more stories about university talent leaving to pursue their endeavors elsewhere.

In the past year, UW-Madison for the first time in more than 40 years slipped out of the top five in the National Science Foundation’s ranking of research institutions. That UW-Madison’s ranking fell while funding fell by \$100 million from 2012 to 2015 is no coincidence.

To deny the UW System more state funding while prohibiting tuition increases ignores inflation’s role in determining costs. Additional cuts would yield diminishing returns and force painful decisions about curriculum, research and maybe even the closing of some campuses.