How to plug the brain drain

By Eric Lindquist
Leader-Telegram staff

In the face of major budget cuts, regional public universities have attempted to find modest financial incentives to retain professors tempted by higher pay at comparable institutions in other states.

The UW System elected last fall to distribute $5 million among state institutions to be used for faculty compensation adjustments. That included $265,724 for UW-Eau Claire, $200,830 for UW-Stout in Menomonie and $144,450 for UW-River Falls.

While those sums are a far cry from the $8 million UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank recently told the UW System Board of Regents her campus has spent since last summer to retain top professors after legislators cut higher education funding, the cash offered a way for smaller campuses to do something for faculty who have had their compensation reduced over the past several years.

At UW-Eau Claire, administrators are working with faculty to figure out the best way to distribute those funds, although it won’t be across the board, Chancellor James Schmidt said Friday.

Schmidt acknowledged that competing offers pose a continual challenge in today’s climate in which UW System professors typically are paid about 20 percent less than their peers at comparable institutions in other states.

“We were able to make small counteroffers to some faculty members who wanted to leave,” Schmidt said, noting that the university hasn’t compiled the data yet on how much money or how many professors have been affected.

Over the years, Schmidt said he that UW-Eau Claire has made competing offers in an attempt to retain and attract nursing professors who are in short supply and can make significantly more in the private sector.

Still, faculty resignations have more than tripled in the past three years — from five in 2 OB14 to 16 in 2015-16—and that doesn’t include the 98 faculty and staff members who took buyouts as part of a voluntary separation incentive program this year to help the university trim its payroll and keep layoffs to a minimum. Schmidt said he has been told no professors left for raises of less than $30,000 a year.
UW-Stout has managed to scrounge up $25,000 to divide among three professors who approached the administration with more lucrative salary offers from out-of-state institutions, Provost Patrick Guilfoile said.

“We try to do that when we can, but we’re pretty constrained in that regard,” he said. “We don’t have a significant pool of money to draw from.”

Guilfoile characterized the pay disparity between UW-Stout and peer institutions in other states as a “significant concern that is growing at this time with the additional constraints on funding.” Administrators hope to do additional private fundraising to help fill the gap and pay for research that professors want to pursue, he said.

The Menomonie campus endured the departure of slightly more than 9 percent of its faculty in 2014-15, compared with about 6 percent systemwide, and then saw 50 faculty and staff leave this year after taking voluntary separation buyouts.

UW-River Falls human resources director Donna Robole said she is not aware of any faculty retention efforts in which the campus was able to match an outside offer in the past year, a period that saw four faculty members resign to make salary-related job changes.

The money from the UW System’s operating contingency fund was intended to support campuses that are statutorily permitted to provide faculty pay increases to recognize merit, correct salary inequities, recognize competitive factors, or account for job reclassifications or promotions, said UW System spokesman Alex Hummel. Campuses make their own decisions on how to use the money.

“Each campus is going to do what they can on the local level to retain talent and honor people’s contributions, but we’re all part of a system, too, and (UW System) President Ray Cross and the board wanted to acknowledge that and decided, if we can help, let’s do it,” Hummel said.

**Quality control**

Such retention efforts are important, Schmidt said, because human capital is what accounts for a university’s educational quality.

“It’s all about our faculty and staff,” he said, adding that the political climate also has driven some professors to other states.

In addition to seeing the UW System absorb $250 million in cuts in the 2015-17 state budget, faculty have felt devalued by legislators’ accusations that they don’t work hard enough and efforts to potentially limit job protections and academic freedom by changing the tenure system, Schmidt said.
“I don’t know if I’d say I’m sounding the alarm, but I’m certainly throwing up a flag,” Schmidt said. “We need to protect the quality that has been a part of UW-Eau Claire for the past 100 years.”

Budget cuts have made it even more challenging to deal with faculty raids by universities from other states, particularly Minnesota in the case of western Wisconsin campuses.

“Minnesota steals the most from us,” said Petre “Nelu” Ghenciu, a UW-Stout math professor and its faculty representative to the UW System. “When somebody is offering $20,000 a year more right across the border, how do you compete with that?”

UW-River Falls Provost Fernando Delgado also acknowledged the retention challenge.

“We have had a number of institutions and other organizations successfully recruit and hire UW-RF faculty and academic staff in the past 12 to 18 months,” he said. “In most cases the salary received was higher than what they were receiving in Wisconsin. The losses have impacted a number of academic departments as well as the library, IT department, student academic support programs, and our student affairs units.”

Pay concerns

Several years of frozen pay combined with increases in employee contributions for health insurance and pensions have left faculty with flagging morale and a loss of take-home pay.

“Our salaries have been flat for so long that its pretty easy to get an offer that pays more than what we’re getting,” said Geoff Peterson, Peterson chairman of UW-Eau Claire’s political science department and the university’s faculty representative to the UW System.

Peterson also fears the quality impact as other institutions take advantage of the climate of uncertainty in Wisconsin by pursuing UW-Eau Claire’s best teachers and researchers.

“You lose your best people, and then you don’t have the resources to replace them when they go, so it’s sort of a doublewhammy for most campuses,” he said.

A cost also is associated with the searching, hiring and training that goes along with replacing people who leave, Ghenciu said, assuming the positions remain funded.

Faculty understand tight state budgets but just don’t want to feel singled out to absorb the brunt of the pain, he said.

While he called incentive payments a “short-term Band-Aid to stop the bleeding,” Ghenciu stressed that faculty appreciate the administration’s stated commitment to addressing the salary gap with whatever resources it can find.
Student impact

Regional universities say they have worked hard to shield students from the impact of budget cuts and faculty losses, but some impact is unavoidable.

Wilson Taylor, chairman of UW-Eau Claire’s biology department, said his department is down five positions this year, forcing it to streamline the curriculum by cutting some small lab courses and replacing them with larger lecture classes.

Unfortunately, longer hours for professors have reduced the time and energy available for faculty research, Taylor said.

The loss of a position in political science has had an impact on course availability for some students.

“We have tried to move things around as best we could to mitigate the damage, but there are only so many pieces you can move around,” Peterson said. “It’s an inevitable consequence of budget cuts that are that significant.”

Despite the attention to pay disparities compared with similar public university systems, the reasons employees stay at UW-Eau Claire often go beyond money. People who come to Eau Claire often end up appreciating the university’s quality and falling in love with the arts scene, school system and overall quality of life in the Chippewa Valley, Schmidt said.

“That’s part of that secret sauce that makes UW-Eau Claire a true jewel of the Upper Midwest,” he said.