

## **Leader Telegram**

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### **Tuition predictability needed**

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Imagine trying to operate a business without being able to control expenses or increase revenue. Challenging? Certainly. Preposterous? Probably.

Increasingly, leaders of universities are being asked why we can't run our institutions more like businesses. The truth is, we would welcome the opportunity to be more entrepreneurial in the way we operate. But given the very real prospect of a state budget that would not adequately fund ongoing, state-mandated operating expenses, while at the same time placing price controls on our revenue streams, one has to wonder what business model might apply.

Without knowing how much state funding will be included when a new biennial budget is finally approved, the UW System Board of Regents recently increased tuition 5.5 percent at four-year campuses, including UW-Eau Claire. The Regents' action means a full-time undergraduate resident student will pay \$251 more for his or her education this year than last. Some (including members of the Legislature considering a 4 percent tuition and fee cap) say the increase approved by the regents is too high. While there is no doubt that, on a percentage basis, tuition at public universities in Wisconsin has increased dramatically in recent years, some perspective is in order.

No matter how you measure it, a UW-Eau Claire education remains an outstanding value. Consider some of these impressive accomplishments from the past year alone: UW-Eau Claire ranked eighth nationally in the number of Fulbright scholars; 14th nationally in the percentage of students who study abroad; was one of only 20 universities nationwide with a student selected to the USA Today All USA Academic First Team; and a record number of National Merit Scholars are attending our campus this fall. Yet UW-Eau Claire students pay some of the lowest overall costs among all four-year campuses in the UW System.

Furthermore, UW-Eau Claire is exceptionally affordable compared with similar universities in other Midwest states. Tuition and fees, including textbook rental, at UW-Eau Claire will total \$5,845 in 2007-08. Compare that to the University of Northern Iowa at \$6,190; Central Michigan University at \$9,120; Illinois State University at \$9,276; and the University of Minnesota-Duluth at \$9,600. Only UMD includes textbook rental in its fees - so add another \$800-\$900 per year to totals at the three other universities.

To put this in business terms, UW-Eau Claire provides our students (customers) with a high quality product (education) at a reasonable cost (when compared with our competitors). In the business community, I am not aware of anyone supporting government mandated price capping, or reducing quality in order to cap their prices. But this is how some critics who espouse market-driven solutions believe we should run our enterprise.

What we need in Wisconsin is tuition predictability - not artificial price controls. Some of the Midwest universities I referred to earlier have in place a tuition structure that guarantees students entering college this fall will pay the same tuition for four to six years - students entering next year will pay a higher rate that also will be in effect for four to six years. This is only one model, but it may be worth studying. Of course, predictable tuition rates depend on predictable funding from the state.

Higher education should not be a partisan issue. The parents, grandparents and great-grandparents of today's students built and nurtured this great UW System because they recognized the importance of providing affordable higher education opportunities for all of Wisconsin's sons and daughters. At a time when Wisconsin must do all it can to stay competitive with not only Minnesota and other neighboring states, but all the states and rest of the world, now is not the time to step back from that commitment. It simply would not be good business.