On Thursday, October 16 more than 100 people gathered at the Alumni Welcome and Conference Center at the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh for a public forum sponsored by the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education (WISCAPE). Attendees were welcomed by Noel Radomski, Director of WISCAPE.

The first keynote speaker was UW System President Ray Cross. He spoke about the UW System’s Evolving Strategic Framework. He stressed the importance of making education more affordable/accessible so public universities could serve the public to “improve the human condition”. He listed several problems facing Wisconsin.

- The first was the statewide talent gap where employers cannot find the high-impact talent that they need to fill jobs. This talent gap will get worse unless UW System intervenes.
- Another problem is the current employment gap. The number of high school graduates in Wisconsin is declining while the number of high school graduates leaving Wisconsin is rising. Wisconsin ranks #8 in the nation among states importing students to attend college, but leaving the state following graduation.
- A third problem is affordability. In an economy that is less than robust, UW System must focus its resources to serve the needs of the state to improve the economy.

UW System must improve the talent path by attracting students ready for post-secondary education. Remediation is a growing concern, especially in Math. 21% of students entering UW system need remedial math; System plans to lower that to 14% within 5 years. To improve college readiness, early preview of placement tests could occur in 10th grade, partnerships with K-12 math teachers could be established, and the number of college courses (CAP) available in High Schools could be increased (Minnesota beats Wisconsin handily in that area).

We must collaborate more with state and federal government and reallocate system resources in order to be more accountable to the needs of the state of Wisconsin.

The next speaker was Alissa Hicklin Fryar, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Oklahoma. She spoke about Public Regional Comprehensive Universities as the backbone of public higher education. These institutions tend to be community-based schools where enrollment for many people in the region is a foregone conclusion.

She postulated that one of the problems facing these institutions is “mission drift”, where public regional comprehensive universities want to become research institutions. That opinion was disputed by some in the audience. The most common graduate programs at these institutions include Education, Business, and Health Care, while the fastest growing programs are in Public Administration, Computer Science, and Parks, Recreation, and Fitness.

Another issue facing public regional comprehensive universities is institutional wealth. Innovation is expensive, especially in a climate of tuition freezes. On-line programs are appealing, but most of them tend to attract in-state interest.
The next speaker was Richard Wells, Chancellor Emeritus of UW-Oshkosh. He spoke of the Rise of the Affordable Quality Education Crisis, claiming that there is a serious crisis, but not a catastrophic crisis – yet. The media is shaping the public perception that there is an affordability crisis in higher education by misrepresenting the debt incurred by graduates as approaching $90,000, when it is actually closer to $29,500 for 2012 graduates. The crisis arises from the reduction in financial support from the state and federal government. The solution to the crisis is to quit pointing fingers of blame and take bold action instead. We need to quit demanding more money from the legislature and take independent action from the state and federal government.

The final speaker was Gordon Davies, Past Director of the State Councils for Virginia and Kentucky. He offered some critical reflections on why we have an affordability crisis and what we should do to resolve the crisis. First of all, public regional comprehensive universities should focus on completion rather than on retention. We want to enroll more first-year students, but not worry so much about retaining them; that approach must be reversed. We need to create partnerships with secondary schools, particularly in math, to avoid remediation once students get to college. Too many students drop out of college while they are taking remedial course work. Rather than specify completion of a number of credits of remedial work, the goal should be proof of competency in content and/or skills. We also need to change the way that we look at funding public higher education. True leadership is helping a group complete its work, not mandating what that work should be.

The afternoon was devoted to small group discussions as a means to create “bold ideas”. The first break-out session addressed the question “WHY do we have an affordability crisis?” Not everyone at my table was convinced that UW System has an affordability crisis, but our table was in the minority. The consensus was that any affordability crisis was due to the dramatic reduction in state support of public higher education.

The second break-out session addressed the question “WHAT should we do to resolve the student affordability crisis?” There were numerous suggestions.

- The affordability crisis is actually a risk crisis. Is the cost of higher education worth the risk?
- First generation, low income students are squeezed the most, so rethink tuition structures.
- Create public/private sponsorships and endowed scholarships.
- Reduce internal competition for students, programs, degrees.
- More collaboration with secondary schools; with UW Colleges.
- Forgive student loans for those students who agree to “serve the public”.
- Make credit transferability easier.
- Address the inefficient use of faculty, staff, and student time.
- Engage shared governance in an effort to lead “bold transformative” action.