

Tom Loftus: Open letter to UW System President Cross about proposed system merger

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UWS President Ray Cross,

Ray I write as a friend.

This letter is to urge you to delay consideration of the surrender of the two year colleges to the four year campuses before the faculty, students, mayors, chambers of commerce and County Boards in those communities have had a chance to be heard.

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Your proposal may be a good idea or a bad idea, but it is not a new idea. Change course and pledge to go on a listening tour and visit every two year college and hear them out. That is the Wisconsin Idea.

I speak from experience. When I was the Speaker and Tommy Thompson was the Minority Leader the University community was in turmoil over several issues that were left over from merger but never addressed. Every campus was fighting for turf and there was not a compromise to be offered.

The two of us travelled to almost all campuses and everyone and anyone was allowed to speak.

We started each forum with an introductory talk. We did this so often at once stop

he gave my speech and I gave his. No one noticed. Expect one Republican in the crowd came up to me and said I was starting to make a lot of sense.

Then we sat and listened and asked questions until the last voice was heard.

The result was that we came back to the Assembly and put forward a series of proposals that represented a distillation of what we had learned. And, we learned a lot. The proposals we put forward were quite different than what we thought we would do before our listening marathon.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, “there was more in heaven and earth than thought of in our philosophy.”

We sold the package to the Republicans and the Democrats; and the Governor; and Madison and the four year campuses; and, the faculty and students. What passed was a consensus that still governs much of how the System operates today.

When the System was set up the power of the office of the President was a contentious debate. You can see the resolution with the choice of the first President, the Chancellor at Madison.

The President was not given much statutory power: not a campus, a faculty member or student was to be in his or her bailiwick. The real intent was the President would be an advocate for education. The mayor of things not the city manager of things.

This is how one of the intellectual architects of merger described it to me just before he passed away:

“The Regents, over the decades, have Instead of envisioning the President of the University as a statewide leader who could speak to the public for the whole system, thus rallying broad public support for higher education, they now regard the president as an executive director for the central office.”

I ask you to take back the role of speaking to the public, after you listen to your constituents.

As an early and public advocate of yours it pained me to see the actions that lead to a faculty vote of no-confidence in your leadership. Use the listening tour to show that they were heard and you came to town to listen.

Thank you.

Tom Loftus
Regent Emeritus

CC: Regents

— Loftus is a former Assembly speaker, served on the UW System Board of Regents and was U.S. ambassador to Norway.