

Cross draws praise following retirement announcement

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Gov. Tony Evers and lawmakers on Friday praised UW System President Ray Cross after announcing he will retire upon the selection of a successor.

The 71-year-old Cross said in a statement his work as president has been “the most rewarding work of my life.”

“I believe there is no better investment for the state of Wisconsin than the University of Wisconsin System,” Cross said in his announcement. “From cutting-edge research on cancer, water quality, and how children learn to educating Wisconsin’s future leaders, the UW System has never been more important.”

Cross was appointed president in 2014 after serving as chancellor of UW Colleges and UW-Extension. He took over during a contentious period between the university and Republicans who controlled the state Legislature, particularly after the system’s cash balances drew fire from some conservatives who called the money a “slush fund.”

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He spent much of his term trying to rebuild relationships with GOP lawmakers, often in the face of criticism from Dems and university advocates that the work wouldn’t pay off. Cross eluded to that during deliberations over the 2019-21 budget as Republicans cut by more than half the boost in state aid Evers had proposed.

Cross told reporters following the vote by the Joint Finance Committee that the university had regularly heard from Republican lawmakers that they wanted more of a focus on better preparing the state’s workforce for high-demand jobs. At the same time, he said, the system was accused by others of putting together its budget proposal based on GOP talking points to focus on workforce development.

"I feel like I've been kicked in the shins," Cross said.

Cross also oversaw the merger of two-year colleges with the four-year institutions amid enrollment drops and cost concerns. The most significant restructuring of the university in years also promoted blowback from some faculty and staff that they weren't consulted ahead of the proposal's rollout.

The university announced it will conduct a national search to find Cross' successor, who must be approved by the UW Board of Regents. That body is still controlled by appointees of former Gov. Scott Walker with Evers making just three selections to the body so far.

"Ray stabilized the UW System at a time of legislative skepticism and financial challenges, and he restored transparency and credibility at the Capitol and among the public," said Regents President Andrew Petersen. "He has guided the System through financial uncertainty and has positioned the System extremely well for the future."

Evers, who served on the board while state schools superintendent, said he was confident the board will select a new leader "who will continue advocating for and investing in our kids, educators, higher education, and the Wisconsin Idea."

"The UW has been in good hands under his leadership, especially during a time when higher education in our state faced significant cuts and challenges and a difficult political environment," Evers said.

The system has faced other challenges during Cross' tenure, including navigating a tuition freeze for in-state undergrads that is now in its seventh year. Meanwhile, the state has produced a declining number of high school graduates, and out-of-state students comprised the largest percentage of the freshman class at the flagship Madison campus in at least 25 years. Overall, enrollment in UW schools dropped 2.6 percent this year.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, praised Cross for his "outstanding leadership" and for "his efforts to ensure free speech is protected on college campuses in our state."

Cross supported efforts by the Board of Regents to implement an amendment to UW statutes that would punish students who are found guilty of action that

“materially or substantially disrupts the free expression of others.” Evers has indicated he opposes the rules, which would need his support to be implemented.

“Ray has left a rock-solid foundation for future system leaders to meet the challenges and opportunities of bringing a world-class education to every Wisconsin student,” Vos said.

In a blog post, UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank credited Cross with providing “steady and valuable leadership to both UW System and prior to that, UW Extension and Colleges, during times that were frequently challenging. He did this with a warm smile and sincere interest in supporting the work of our students, faculty and staff.”

See reaction in the press release section:

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