

Regents President Petersen praises Thompson's approach to leading UW System

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Board of Regents President Andrew Petersen doesn't expect the UW System to rekindle its presidential search process until next summer at the earliest.

In an interview with WisPolitics.com, the appointee of former GOP Gov. Scott Walker touted interim-President Tommy Thompson's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic on campuses and his "innovative" budget proposal to tee the state up to handle demographic shifts and a switch to more frequent online instruction.

"President Thompson will be system president until we have our next, no matter who he or she is," he said. "I'm really proud of all we've been able to do. And a lot of that has a lot to do with the relationships that President Thompson maintains."

Regents appointed Thompson, a former GOP Wisconsin gov, to the role over the summer after the previous presidential search imploded when sole finalist candidate Jim Johnsen withdrew his name from consideration.

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Thompson has since established COVID testing programs for students and faculty on campuses, and even partnered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, an agency he once ran under President George W. Bush, to provide "surge testing" sites for local communities.

Petersen praised Thompson's connections for giving the state extra federal assistance. He added the former gov "treads on his own integrity" and that will come in handy as lawmakers debate allocating funds to the system in the next budget.

The system's 2021-23 biennial budget proposal doesn't ask for an end to the tuition freeze, as Thompson previously said he didn't think it was the right time to ask for students and parents to pay more tuition in the midst of a pandemic. But Petersen said he feels encouraged to hear budget watchers outside the system at least discussing a potential lift.

Petersen said the board likely won't open a new presidential search committee until the summer of 2021 "at the soonest." Shared governance representatives blasted the previous search committee for having no staff, faculty or students at the table and for nominating only a single candidate — a straight, white male — for final review.

While Petersen said he believes in smaller search committees over larger ones to get the job done, he thinks the next regent president after him "will have a lot to say about how that process goes."

Petersen has served on the board since 2013, as Wisconsin Technical College System board president until 2015 and then as a regent.

Although his term doesn't expire until 2022, fellow regents Jose Delgado and Eve Hall, both Walker appointees, have their terms up in May 2021, which will give Gov. Tony Evers appointees nine of the 16 regent seats. The WTCS board president and state superintendent also sit on the board.

Petersen said he doesn't expect to be reelected as board president once the new Evers appointees come in. And he doesn't anticipate he'll sit on the next presidential search committee, either.

But what Petersen did say is he has nothing but optimism for the system's future under Thompson's vision and a new regent president. He called the current makeup of the board one of the most practical and collegial that he's worked with in his tenure.

"When you serve on a board, you hope to leave it better than you found it," he said. "And when you look at that, it's a fairly balanced scorecard. And I've really been pleased to work with this Board of Regents group."