

Tommy Thompson: Investing in UW System will renew the Wisconsin Idea

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If our great state is going to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic poised for growth, we will need to renew the Wisconsin Idea for the 21st century with a real investment in the University of Wisconsin System.

When I was recruited and agreed to serve as president of the UW System amid the pandemic, I did so with the unwavering belief that there is no greater asset in our great state besides our people than our public universities. I said I would be its biggest advocate and toughest evaluator.

I've learned a lot in the last two months – about the commitment and dedication of our university leadership, faculty, and staff; about the unbridled ambition and resilience of our students; and about the vital role our universities play in their communities. Just look at the way we've responded to the pandemic – engineering face shields for commercial distribution and researching new vaccines, pivoting to remote teaching and learning, working in tandem with local public health authorities.

I've learned enough to want to build on our strengths, take advantage of new opportunities, and do everything I can to increase educational outcomes so that our students and our state thrive.

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Those lessons are reflected in my 2021-23 budget proposal, which the Board of Regents approved last week. It starts with improving access by extending UW-Madison's Bucky's Tuition Promise to the rest of our UW System universities. We

call it the Wisconsin Tuition Promise, and we'll make sure every student from a Wisconsin household with an income of \$60,000 or less has enough money to pay tuition and fees.

It includes growing our online education program; offering financial incentives for students who want to be teachers and school leaders; seeking regulatory relief and borrowing authority so we can focus resources on the classroom and stabilize our finances; supporting the Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin; increasing assistance to agriculture; supporting students' behavioral and mental health needs; expanding educational options to Wisconsin's prisons; and diversifying our revenue sources.

Doing this will require a commitment from the taxpayers, the governor, and the legislature to properly fund the UW System. I promise you that we will do our part, and Wisconsin will reap the rewards. After all, for every dollar invested in the UW System, we pump \$23 into the state's economy.

We educate nearly 170,000 students and graduate nearly 37,000 every year. More than 90 percent of the Wisconsin resident graduates remain in the state five years after graduation, contributing to their communities. Every Wisconsin resident benefits from our vibrant public universities.

We can build on our strengths and take advantage of new opportunities. Investing now in the University of Wisconsin System will help address some of Wisconsin's most pressing problems and help us renew the Wisconsin Idea for the 21st century. I ask you, the residents of this state, to get behind this effort. There is no more important investment we can make!

—Thompson is president of the University of Wisconsin System and former governor of Wisconsin.