

Tommy Thompson: Running the UW System is our responsibility

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The University of Wisconsin System owns a critical responsibility to open our classrooms this September to deliver the in-person education students deserve and parents expect. And we are planning to do just that. Unfortunately, some want us to ignore our unambiguous authority and duty under Wisconsin law to protect the “health, safety, and welfare of the university.”

As soon as I accepted the UW System Presidency in July 2020, I put my experience as former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services and Wisconsin Governor to work, with chancellors, to ensure we keep our universities open and safe. Together over the last 14 months we have been Johnny-on-the-spot, building a robust student testing program, cultivating a culture of responsibility on campus, and providing tests and vaccinations to Wisconsin residents – steps praised by some of the top federal health officials and scientists.

The contention that the University does not have this authority is not only wrong, but also incredibly problematic as we bring students back to campus. The UW System is not required to seek political approval for every internal management decision, nor should it. The UW System is governed by the Board of Regents, an 18-member group with 16 members appointed by governors of both political parties. The Board hires the System president and the chancellors. It establishes policies for the UW System and engages in statutory rulemaking when necessary. We control access to our buildings and facilities.

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Our authority, as exercised by our universities in requiring masking and testing, enabled us to succeed last academic year, when our on-campus COVID-19 prevalence rates were significantly below state rates. In fact, testing and masking at this summer's UW youth programs enabled us to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks, allowing us to serve approximately 40,000 students at universities across the state.

At a time when students and staff want assurances that where they live, work, and study will be healthy and safe, we must be nimble. Our talented faculty are rightly concerned about the environment they will be teaching in, and the uncertainty caused by this effort is troublesome. Last academic year, the legislature provided tacit acknowledgment for our nationally recognized mitigation steps. The endgame of these new efforts to control our universities would put at risk staff, students, and the businesses that count on our universities to be open, safe, and vibrant.

The effort to block the UW System's authority is both wrong on the law and wrong as a matter of public policy. Had this happened last academic year, the University might never have been able to set up community testing and vaccination sites, or even isolate sick students. It would have been a disaster. I have no plans to abdicate our responsibility.

— *Thompson is president of the University of Wisconsin System and served as Wisconsin's 42nd governor.*