

# Debbie Ford: Wisconsin students deserve an increase in the Wisconsin Grant

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The University of Wisconsin System has taken a big step toward helping more low- and moderate-income students attain a bachelor's degree. The new Wisconsin Tuition Promise will ensure that qualified students can attend any university within the UW System tuition free.

The new program will assist an estimated 8,000 students when fully operational and will go a long way toward reversing a troubling trend – fewer and fewer UW students come from low- and moderate-income families – and a long way toward developing talent that will move our state forward.

But there is one other important step Wisconsin can take: increasing our state's commitment to the Wisconsin Grant program.

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Wisconsin Grants have been the main form of state-funded financial aid for decades. The program provides up to \$3,150 annually, but that amount has not changed in a dozen years and about 3,000 fewer UW System students are receiving critical Wisconsin Grants than a decade ago.

The stagnant funding for the Wisconsin Grant means sometimes qualified students don't get the aid they need. Because the grants can be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis, those who apply late can find themselves without an award even if they qualify.

Overall, state investment on grants, loans, and scholarships over the last decade dropped by about one-half of a percent between 2011 and 2021 at a time when inflation increased by 19 percent and unmet need for low-income students was rising.

Increasing the Wisconsin Grant and creating the Wisconsin Tuition Promise are critical building blocks to the existing steps we already take that make public higher education in Wisconsin among the most affordable in the nation. We'll soon be in the 10th year of a tuition freeze, and we're providing more institutional grant aid – \$157 million in 2020-21, an \$81 million increase over the last 10 years.

It's hard to say just how many students don't enroll at a UW System university because there's just not enough financial aid. But we know the number isn't zero, and we know low-income students are much more likely to discontinue their studies over finances.

Increasing our state's commitment to student financial aid is critical to increasing enrollment in our universities and progress to degree attainment. While financial aid is important to all low- and moderate-income students, we know that it is especially important to students of color, who rely on this assistance to enroll.

Wisconsin's workforce is constantly evolving, especially in an increasingly complex knowledge economy. The critical-thinking skills and talent we help develop prepares students for the workforce of the future. Simply stated, the value of a baccalaureate degree is more important than ever, and the opportunity to obtain one needs to be provided to everyone in Wisconsin.

I came to Wisconsin over a decade ago because I was attracted to the promise and mission of the UW System – to grow people, grow jobs, and grow communities. An investment in aid for those who can fall behind will not only transform lives, but it will also make a lasting difference in every community across Wisconsin.

*– Ford is chancellor of UW-Parkside.*