

Former WAICU head calls for leaders to fight negative perceptions around college education

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Rolf Wegenke, the recently retired head of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, says education leaders in the state need to fight negative perceptions around college education.

“I think that’s the critical issue looking forward, is this ‘you don’t need college’ crowd,” Wegenke told WisPolitics.com President Jeff Mayers in a recent interview. “And what are we going to do about it? I think we can’t be tacit. I think we have to get out there and tell the story.”

He says that process starts in K-12 education, though he acknowledged high school guidance counselors are grappling with issues such as student drug use, bullying and limited staffing. Still, he said these advisors as well as faculty and leaders in education need to be communicating the value of post-secondary education to students.

Wegenke also expressed “great respect” for the trades, noting people like welders and bus drivers play an important role in the economy alongside engineers and teachers.

Before joining the WAICU, Wegenke spent nearly 17 years working in economic development under five different Wisconsin governors.

He discussed enrollment challenges facing independent colleges and universities in the state, which currently have about 56,000 students. Still, he noted some of these institutions have fared better than others, and said the COVID-19 pandemic has played a significant role in recent enrollment declines.

“Part of it is birth rate, and we’ve known that was coming for a while,” he said, adding the pandemic resulted in “record dropouts” when many people were out of work. He added many potential students with financial challenges weren’t aware of

opportunities for financial aid.

The discussion also ranged from President Biden's student loan forgiveness plan to the cost of higher education for students and efforts by WAICU members to share program costs. He said these efforts have resulted in over \$230 million in savings in the three decades he's been with the organization.

"We have a national reputation for our cost-saving efforts here ... and if we can control our costs, that helps us control tuition levels," he said. "And you look at the stats too for our students, we actually enroll and graduate a higher number of low-income students than the UW."

Rockford University President Eric Fulcomer has been named the next president of the WAICU and will be stepping down from his current position in December to take the new role. Wegenke says the organization "is going to be very fortunate to have him."

Listen to the full interview:

<https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/interview-with-rolf-wegenke-former-president-and-ceo-of-the-waicu>

-By Alex Moe