

# Tommy Thompson: UW System deserves your support, faces challenges head on

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When I left my parents' farm in Elroy to attend UW-Madison, we were so poor that I carried my belongings in a paper bag instead of a suitcase. I went on to earn a law degree, serve in the legislature, get elected to four terms as governor, lead the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as its Secretary, and become president of the University of Wisconsin System.

It's been an honor to serve as UW System president these past 20 months, and in my final weeks in office, I've been visiting our 13 universities, meeting with community and business leaders, faculty and staff, and students. I wanted to thank our employees and students for their resilience during the pandemic, point out our accomplishments, and share a few final thoughts about higher education in our state.

First, it's time we stop apologizing for the UW and start bragging about it. The UW System is Wisconsin's greatest asset other than its people. We need to let everybody know what a great value for students we have here, perhaps with a robust marketing campaign, because the returns to our state when our UW succeeds are tremendous.

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I want our state's young people and their parents to hear how vitally important a university education is to their individual growth, to our Wisconsin communities,

and to our state's economic health. To become the engineers, doctors, teachers, writers, data scientists, and conservationists of tomorrow, you need a university degree. And our universities are the key to providing critical thinking skills that help develop citizens in an information-rich society. A college degree is more important than ever.

While the UW System remains critical, we are facing challenges. So here are a few things I want everyone to think about:

A Blue Ribbon Commission should be established to study the future of public higher education in our state. The Wisconsin Technical College System has been a great partner, but demographic, financial, and other challenges compel us to seek ways to collaborate and innovate.

We must also avoid "regionalizing" our universities, which would have the effect of reducing enrollment and access for students, but we should continue to build on operational efficiencies here at UW System.

Being on a UW campus and taking classes in person is a quintessential part of the higher education experience. We must continue to support the residential university because that is the kind of education our students deserve and parents expect. But we must also find ways to better offer education credits online—including to the estimated 815,000 Wisconsinites who have some college credit but no degree. We have proven that we offer a quality education online, but we need to do more or else we will fall further behind.

We need to highlight the unique qualities that make our universities special. That doesn't mean we eliminate dozens of majors. But it might mean identifying a few fantastic programs and departments at each campus and building them up by adding professors and resources and recruiting more students. More targeted specialization will enhance our universities and make them more attractive.

The past 20 months has been a whirlwind of activity and challenges, yet I have now seen first-hand the extraordinary opportunity that our 13 universities offer students and families throughout Wisconsin. Let's keep it that way and make it even better.

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

