

# WTC President Still: “Part two: Chancellor Blank reflects on her nine years at UW-Madison”

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MADISON, Wis. – In the spring of 2013, just before she was confirmed as the next UW-Madison chancellor by the Board of Regents, Rebecca Blank was criticized by some Republican state legislators for her “radical policies.”

On her way out the door nine years later, she received a compliment of sorts from Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, who portrayed Blank’s successor as a partisan Democrat and added: “After all the work of Tommy Thompson and Rebecca Blank that attempted to strengthen relationships between the university and the Legislature, this is a step backwards.”

Perhaps Chancellor-designee Jennifer Mnookin will hear similar praise for bipartisanship someday herself.

Here are highlights from a recent interview with Blank, who will become president of Northwestern University this fall. A previous column focused on Blank’s belief that UW-Madison needs separate bonding authority for building projects.

**On rising student application rates at Madison:** “I think many of the big flagships are up,” Blank said, and applications to UW-Madison have nearly doubled in nine years. While some smaller liberal arts colleges are seeing a decline, major public universities are generally not.

In fact, out-of-state applications to Madison increased when tuition rates rose. “We priced ourselves at a level that confirms we are of national quality,” Blank said.

UW-Madison’s switch to accepting the Common Application, which is a single online college form used by more than 900 colleges and universities, also provided at least a temporary boost.

**On the 2019 creation of the School of Computer, Data and Information Sciences:** “The number of CDIS majors has grown by leaps and bounds since we created it,” Blank said. “It’s now our biggest major by an order of magnitude.” With a pledge to increase faculty and build a \$225-million home for the school, she said, that has also helped to attract more students.

**On successes and challenges during her tenure:** While emphasizing it was a team effort, Blank singled out improving educational outcomes while addressing student debt; increasing access to scholarships for in-state students; sustaining the research enterprise; and re-integrating the UW-Extension and public broadcasting into UW-Madison after a 50-year absence.

The UW-Madison graduation “on-time” rate ranks in the top 10 among public universities, with 89% of students getting an undergraduate degree within six years and 73% within four years. The “Bucky’s Tuition Promise” program increased scholarships from \$25 million in 2012 to about \$100 million in the latest academic year. The “All Ways Forward” private fundraising campaign exceeded its \$3.2 billion goal by \$1 billion.

She described the university’s efforts to improve campus diversity as a “process that you constantly engage in” versus a task with a defined end point.

“I can tell you we spent more time on that issue than any other,” Blank said. “We have accomplished a lot of things on that front, but there is also a lot of work to be done.”

**On the future of UW System campuses with enrollment problems:** “Three things have weighed on the UW System – the 10-year tuition freeze, the small increases in state funding, and demographics,” Blank said. “It means that a lot of the regional campuses are really struggling. I am worried that, given the magnitude of challenges facing many other campuses, there will be some political impetus to take money from the system’s top performer and to give it to others. That would not be the approach in a private-sector organization.”

**On the value of tenure:** “I think it has been a very successful system for higher education in America. I did my best work after I received tenure,” said Blank, who is Ph.D. economist. She explained that tenure allows investment of time outside of the classroom in longer-term projects, particularly research. “Tenure gives faculty time and space ... it is one of the primary reasons why higher education in the United States is the research model for the rest of the world,” she said.

**On her first order of business at Northwestern:** “Figure out where to have lunch?” she joked. “Because I am president-elect for a period of time, it allows me to meet people, to listen and to build relationships. I will start there.”