

Alex Joers: Neglecting UW system defunds our future

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Across our state, there is one institution that has elevated thousands of Wisconsinites and our ideas throughout every generation. The University of Wisconsin System is a global magnet for talent and educational advancement. However, during the state budget debate some legislators are forgetting that if we want to compete for the next generation of leaders, we cannot defund our greatest asset of higher learning.

Last week, the Republican-led Joint Finance Committee (JFC) took direction from the Assembly Speaker and decided that they would cut funding from our UW System to the tune of \$32 million because they are unmoved by the significance of programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on our campuses. This would equate to 188 jobs being eliminated because, as one JFC member said they want to, “focus these dollars towards enhancing Wisconsin’s future workforce.” Then they went further to say that this would help address a shortage of nurses, engineers, and data scientists.

This pontification comes with a compelling amount of irony, as JFC Republicans, earlier this month, undermined the UW System’s capital budget to bolster research space for the very professions they say they want to help.

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Take for instance the UW Madison Engineering Building, UW System’s top funding request this budget cycle. If this project had been approved, the College of Engineering could have grown its student population to 5,500 students to meet the

demand from Wisconsin companies. But because JFC Republicans delayed the project, it will likely increase in cost by \$28 million not to mention the future engineers we may lose in the process.

At my own alma mater, UW La Crosse, phase two of the Prairie Springs Science Center was shovel-ready to support the College of Health and Science in retaining 87% of their graduates in Wisconsin. Businesses in the STEM-based economy lauded this project to meet regional workforce needs. Again, JFC Republicans indicated that's not their focus and passed on the project.

To underscore these major blows to our ability to attract and keep students in Wisconsin and support our economy, JFC Republicans have effectively told the UW System: you can forget about building a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce as well.

DEI programming is essential to strengthen our campuses across the state. As the UW System president noted in previous testimony, DEI offices support veterans, first-generation students, women in STEM, and people across the political spectrum.

We also need to be concerned about what defunding DEI programming will say to historically marginalized communities when they are considering joining our UW System. If we are not choosing to be invested in the success of every student, how can we expect to build a workforce that understands global challenges? Our communities of Black, Indigenous, and students of color need to be valued, respected, and supported on every campus.

So as my Republican colleagues aim to complete their budget talks, it is in our best interest as a state to reconsider their previous counter-intuitive decisions. To grow the workforce of tomorrow and strengthen our UW System; restore DEI funding and get top capital building projects back on track.

-Joers, D-Middleton, represents the 79th Assembly District. '