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Sen. Larson: Republican wrecking crew

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Madison, WI – It's been said that Wisconsin has two seasons: winter and construction. Sadly, our revered UW System appears to be in the midst of a third, most unwelcome season – one of deconstruction. While you may not see any orange barrels or caution tape in front of Bascom Hill, our UW System is being ravaged by a demolition squad of disinvestment from Republican budgets, along with declining enrollment and rising costs.

The evidence is clear to anyone who's been paying attention. The closure of UW-Platteville's satellite campus in Richland, layoffs and furloughs at UW-Oshkosh, and the just-announced mass furloughs at UW-Parkside and UW-Platteville are just preamble; ten of the thirteen UW campuses are running a structural deficit. It's hard to say just how bad things will get if we do not act soon, but the next several weeks and months will tell us a lot about how bad things already are.

Wisconsin entered this budget cycle with a $7 billion surplus. Governor Evers proposed a $305 million increase in UW System funding over the biennium, but Republicans cut the budget by $32 million instead – not for any evidence-based reason, but out of pure politics and spite.

Recruitment efforts, particularly those designed to attract underserved communities, returning, and non-traditional students, could move toward improving enrollment concerns, but even these efforts have been undermined by a Republican party at war with the very concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

After a lengthy unfunded freeze in tuition that recently ended, UW schools have been forced to start raising costs for students to keep up with inflation. This is a Band-Aid fix for a cracked funding model that, if sustained, would only make our

enrollment problems worse. For decades, students have been forced to shoulder an ever-increasing share of the costs of higher education, and the result has been generational debt that hurts our economy and limits opportunities for far too many families.

Four decades ago, in 1984, tuition accounted for just 13.9% of UW revenues, while state support was 41.7%. By 2022, tuition far outpaced state support, 24.1% to 18.0%, respectively.

We must do what we can to make tuition more affordable while maintaining our world-class colleges and universities. Our next generation cannot afford to continue taking on massive debt to begin their careers. Instead, we should get a grip on tuition and “fund the freeze,” an idea I have consistently supported, but legislative Republicans continue to reject.

Public education, including higher education, is the foundation of a healthy democracy and a thriving economy. We are now faced with a crucial choice – do we stand still and allow our UW System, the economic engine of our state and a point of pride for its graduates, be leveled by a slow-motion wrecking ball? Or, do we mix up some concrete, reinforce the foundation, and build it back up toward a brighter tomorrow?

Republicans in the legislature need to focus more time and effort on growing our economy by supporting higher education, and less on blowing up our institutions for political gain.