

Senate committee hears from Evers' regents; Chair Hutton noncommittal on vote

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Sen. Rob Hutton, R-Brookfield, was noncommittal about a future vote on Board of Regents appointees following a confirmation hearing on 11 of Gov. Tony Evers' nominees.

The Senate Universities and Revenue Committee chair after Tuesday's hearing said he doesn't know yet when the committee will hold an executive session on the appointments, some of whom were first appointed in 2019. Hutton said he is in conversations with leadership about an eventual floor vote.

While there were no contentious exchanges during the hearing, lawmakers did touch on key issues such as enrollment, diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, and free speech on campuses.

Only two of Evers' appointments to the board have been confirmed by the GOP-controlled Senate — Ed Manydeeds and Karen Walsh. The committee heard from the remaining Evers appointees Tuesday: Angela Adams, Amy Blumenfeld Bogost, Dana Wachs, Ashok Rai, John Miller, Joan Prince, Jim Kreuser, Jennifer Staton, Kyle Weatherly, Héctor Colón and Evan Brenkus.

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Miller, who was first appointed in 2021, has been appointed to the board twice by Evers but never confirmed. He was initially appointed to finish the term of former Regent José Delgado, who died that year.

Of the current members, Bogost, Weatherly and Colón have been on the board the longest without confirmation after they were appointed in 2019.

Hutton during the hearing questioned the role of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, suggesting they haven't led to more diverse student bodies. Assembly Speaker Robin Vos has said he won't give the System another nickel until DEI positions are eliminated.

"In terms of percentages, our numbers are still falling short in terms of representation from the broad backgrounds and demographics within our state and within our communities," Hutton said.

Prince, former vice chancellor of global inclusion and engagement at UW-Milwaukee, said DEI efforts on campus began because students asked for them.

"It is a student request. So the campuses didn't come up with the idea, the students requested it to campus. This is what they wanted, this is what makes them feel the sense of belonging," Prince said.

Prince said graduation numbers are moving in a positive direction, adding it's important to realize the number of students enrolling in higher education is down nationally.

Hutton also asked Miller, who was former Dem U.S. Rep. Jerry Kleczka's deputy chief of staff, about his political background.

Hutton said Miller's political involvement is "completely fine and understandable," but questioned how difficult it is for him to maintain a "balanced perspective" on the board.

Miller said he sees the board as "not bipartisan, but nonpartisan." He shared comments from former Regent Scott Beightol, an appointee of former GOP Gov. Scott Walker, saying he had never experienced "divisiveness," "petty politics" or "gotcha rhetorical skirmishes" in his time on the board.

Hutton also brought up the issue of free speech at universities, citing a UW System student on the issue.

Miller said universities are meant to have intellectual diversity, and more speech should be encouraged.

"I was disheartened to hear that some of our conservative students feel like they can't safely explain or advocate from their point of view, and I think that's entirely

inappropriate in the classroom. A classroom should be a melting pot of ideas,” Miller said.

He added the problem “can’t be that bad,” noting he would be attending an event with former GOP House Speaker Paul Ryan later in the day at UW-Madison.