



STATE OF WISCONSIN

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Sunday, the New York Times headlined a new \$3.75 billion federal initiative, approved by the U.S. Senate and expected to pass the House, that would give \$750 grants to low-income college students who successfully completed a “rigorous secondary school program of study,” grants that would increase for juniors and seniors with specific declared majors. We couldn’t ask for higher-level acknowledgment that we’re on the right track with LEAP but, from my perspective as a top official in Wisconsin’s executive branch, this quiet addition to the budget bill could well hobble our ability to meet and sustain the initiative’s goals in our state and, I would argue, yours. Let me explain.

As the vast majority of family-supporting jobs now require post-secondary training and education, children’s aspirations for college are nearly universal. Low-income and minority students are likely, though, to fall into yawning achievement gaps, or stumble over tuition costs, or bump up against parents’ anachronistic attitudes toward college and confusing protocols that keep them from matriculating – or convert them into attrition statistics.

That happens at no small expense to all of us. A 2002 Education Commission of the States study claims that if we were to increase minority students’ participation in college to that of white students, we would create an additional \$231 billion in Gross Domestic Product and at least \$80 billion in new tax revenues. We have front row seats for a seismic shift from an industrial to knowledge economy; we must find more ways to articulate the return on education to our nation’s overall wealth, to assert the public value of a liberal education in an era of global competition.

Bob Jones made it easy for this audience to agree right now: a liberal education is quickly becoming the price of admission to a twenty-first century knowledge economy. A liberal education prepares students for the reality they will encounter *and* meets the needs of employers *and*, with its grounding in ethics and social responsibility, prepares them for the world we want *and* deepens the nation’s talent pool for innovation.

But more precise definition of the essential outcomes of a liberal education for a student, state and nation requires empowering the entire community to enter the debate. Thus LEAP. With broad commitment and bold leadership, this initiative can help inform how government and educational institutions evolve to support citizens’ success in this time of flux, drive

development of appropriate metrics to measure their effectiveness and assign responsibility for meeting those goals, and invite unprecedented partnerships to sustain it.

LEAP is a brilliant intervention at this critical moment. We talk a lot about affordability, access, graduation rates and accountability; LEAP forces that conversation to merge with an examination of the kinds of learning today's college graduates need.

- It sidelines partisan rhetoric to center our focus for public policy on the real engine for smart growth and development – an intellectually agile workforce functioning as an ethical, engaged citizenry.
- It responds to prevailing wisdom that business performance and national prosperity today depend on the creation and application of new knowledge, on our ability to innovate.
- It reestablishes the value of the work of the academy in mining, maintaining and building knowledge.
- It calls on the archetypal attributes of our nation's founders: creativity, innovation, risk-taking and entrepreneurship.
- It should trigger better understanding of how education policy from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 must be aligned in a continuum to support these goals, resulting in more cost-effective public investments. Think of LEAP as a powerful centrifugal force for necessary change.
- Finally, LEAP builds on the strength of a democracy and, with its implicit demand for unprecedented partnerships, reinforces our democratic system.

Challenges lay ahead, notably the surprising lack of familiarity with the idea of a liberal education of so many students and their families. A generalized distrust of all that is modified as "liberal." Too many students headed this way who think of their college education as a private rather than public good, ignorant to the fact that the public and private sectors already underwrite a significant portion of the cost.

Other obstacles to hurdle are within this world. The academy's lexicon for self-reference often confounds would-be consumers and holds them at a distance. We can't build public confidence in higher education without giving the public a sense of fluency when speaking about it, without giving them a way to think about it and the words to support it.

Many academics' strong sense of responsibility to and comfort in the tradition of liberal education translates into apprehension about "watering it down" – and is read by the public as persistent elitism. Academics are, reliably and responsibly, skeptical about confusing the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of profit. And in my experience, academic administrators and faculty too often struggle to articulate their own case for a liberal education, and are utterly naïve about the political context in which they work.

Add in the facts that alumni have been better developed as donors than as advocates, and that the business community does not fully understand how the financial picture of too many educational institutions breeds a fragility that has an impact far beyond the reach of their campuses.

So what will LEAP look like? Let's talk about the University of Wisconsin, an ideal selection to pilot LEAP for many reasons that play to our state's strengths and weaknesses. Wisconsin boasts 20 liberal arts colleges, and a network of 47 Technical College and 26 UW campuses,

with recently improved articulation between the latter two, for a total of well over half a million students pursuing some level of post-secondary studies.

But for all our capacity, we have not done well at enrolling and graduating low-income and minority students. In fact, we have seen a decline in recent years. And Wisconsin is becoming an immigrant state, much like we were in the early part of the 20th century. Only this time, the immigrants are the Hmongs, Somalis, Sudanese and Latinos, not the Poles, Belgians, Norwegians and Germans.

At the same time, Wisconsin is facing a workforce crisis that is coming at us like a steaming train. We have a higher than average percentage of baby boomers, smaller young generation, a declining birth rate and a disturbingly high net out-migration of bright college graduates.

UW-Madison was recently named the nation's #1 research university, but it is the flagship for a state that ranks 35th of 50 in terms of the percentage of workers age 25 and over who carry the credential of a baccalaureate. We are a low wage state; we know we need to increase the number of citizens carrying a baccalaureate degree. You would think it an easy job to convince our lawmakers to maintain a strong and accessible university system, but the numbers tell a different story.

General purpose state revenue to the UW System has fallen precipitously over the past ten years. Our contribution per FTE is 14% below the national average, lodging us solidly in the bottom at #46. GPR as a percentage of the university system budget has followed national trends; at 24%, it is only half of what it was 30 years ago. If we slice the numbers to show GPR to the UW as a percentage of overall state spending, it is just one third of what it was 30 years ago – 4% in the 2004-5 academic year. And tuition has increased 40% in just three years.

Other signs of legislative hostility include bills to criminalize stem cell research and prohibit dispensing of emergency contraception at UW student clinics. It is only fair to mention at this point that UW administrators themselves generated what seemed like an endless series of public relations gaffes this past year.

None of that is insurmountable in a state that built a magnificent infrastructure for higher education. We issue from citizens who valued education and made genuine sacrifices to ensure that children everywhere in the state lived within reach of a university campus; we hail from a state that claims the nation's first kindergarten, where the idea for Social Security was hatched and disability insurance premiered. We speak with nostalgic pride of the Wisconsin Idea, that notion that the university should serve as a laboratory of ideas to inform public policy, that the boundaries of the university were the boundaries of the state.

I am confident we will recapture the public's imagination and re-center liberal education in our plans for Wisconsin's future. Campus/community dialogues on this very topic are happening across the state. The faculty has been engaged to anchor their courses in the context of a liberal education right in the class syllabus. President Kevin Reilly will soon announce his Council on Diversity, and our state's PK-16 Leadership Council is a natural vehicle by which we could set up a seamless way of thinking about what constitutes adequate preparation to contribute in a knowledge economy.

LEAP gives us a powerful controlling metaphor to turn all public discourse related to the university into a conversation about how our investment in education connects to our economic outlook. What would success look like?

- ✓ PK-12 education will drive more, and more diverse, well-prepared students to pursue a liberal education.
- ✓ There will be integrity to our campaign: even as we aspire to determined inclusion to ensure access for a diverse student body, each institution of higher learning must examine its own practices and record related to equal opportunity for women and minorities in its employ, and bring it into alignment with its goals for students.
- ✓ Undergraduate programs will follow the lead of top business schools, and introduce more interdisciplinary work to foster more creative problem-solving in an increasingly complex world.
- ✓ Expanded undergraduate research opportunities will underscore and strengthen the relationship between scholarly work, creativity, multiple disciplines and the community.
- ✓ The state will create a visible matrix of opportunity to help them connect the dots between a liberal arts degree and their career dreams.
- ✓ Institutions of higher education will collaborate with the state to define and collect the data necessary to drive effective advocacy with vivid, convincing narratives.
- ✓ The argument for a state and nation's investment to make a liberal education broadly accessible and affordable will be data-driven and advanced in economic terms. And the metrics to gauge return on that investment will measure progress of both students and of the community and state, and will be checked annually to engage debate should we need to correct our course.
- ✓ That argument for investment in a liberal education will emphasize the importance of preserving the independence of our great universities if they are to both rise above and serve the competing interests of those in the private sector.
- ✓ There will be a statewide echo of public testimony as to the value of a liberal education, led by the business community, recorded by the media, and repeated in a wide variety of settings by unexpected voices.
- ✓ The media will provide ongoing coverage of the campaign as a project of civic journalism.
- ✓ We will be strategic: instead of just lobbying legislative leaders, we will create for them a constituency for reinvestment in liberal education, one characterized by a sense of joint ownership, across sectors, for success.
- ✓ Lawmakers will respond by committing to maintaining a system of higher education that balances the twin demands of excellence and mass access.
- ✓ LEAP will require/foster bold, collaborative leadership, with participation from the academy, the state house and the private sector.

World leaders gathered this week in Davos, Switzerland, at an economic summit titled, "The Creative Imperative;" our work here is to be sure our nation builds the workforce necessary to stay in front in an era of global competition. From Green Bay to New York to Austin to San Diego, the promise of opportunity – for women, for minorities and children of immigrants, for young professionals, for established and for upstart businesses – depends on the possibility in each place of upward mobility beginning on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. We can guarantee that mobility, and, therefore, a robust and productive workforce, increased earnings and a more desirable climate for investment, if we build confidence in and access to a great liberal education.

Back to that budget provision. I truly believe that the commitment our states and our nation must make to higher education can only proceed from a common and clear understanding of its enduring public value. We must engage all citizens to own the outcome of public debate that sets our priorities. A system of grants administered by the federal government will merely add another layer of bureaucracy and create greater distance between a citizen and education issues.

LEAP's premise, that intellectual rigor and virtue in multiple disciplines are practical 21st century life survival tools, if broadly accepted, will inevitably drive government and educational institutions to evolve, to innovate in response. It will indeed, then, become the framework by which we write our nation's future.