

With an Ambitious Merger Proposal, Wisconsin Charts Its Own Course for Change

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By Eric Kelderman OCTOBER 12, 2017

The list of pressures facing public higher education in Wisconsin would be familiar to policy makers in many states: an aging population, declining enrollment, scarce public dollars, and growing demands from employers and lawmakers to meet work-force needs.

The solution that the University of Wisconsin system is considering is, however, ambitious. System officials [announced](#) this week a proposed restructuring that would merge all of the state's public two- and four-year campuses.

The changes are meant to combat the broad demographic challenges that are affecting higher education across the Midwest and northeastern United States. While mergers are being planned or carried out in several other states, the proposal in Wisconsin is, on its face, one of the most sweeping.

In particular, the proposal seeks to reverse the declining enrollment at the two-year colleges and enhance the system's relevance in a state with an aging population and a migration of residents from rural to urban areas, said the president of the system, Raymond W. Cross.

"From a political perspective, one of the things we want to do is maintain a university community in areas of the state that are shrinking," Mr. Cross said during an interview with *The Chronicle*.

The system is also responding to the realities of a state where lawmakers have made steep cuts to higher-education budgets in recent years while demanding better outcomes, said Thomas L. Harnisch, director of state relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

But planning and arranging all of the details of the proposed mergers will present a challenge in Wisconsin, given an already strained relationship between the system leadership and university faculty. Last year, faculty at the flagship campus in Madison

[voted](#) no confidence in Mr. Cross and the system's Board of Regents, following changes to the policy on tenure.

Anja Wanner, chair of the University Committee and a professor of English at Madison, said the system will have to do a much better job of informing and engaging faculty and staff members to carry out the proposal.

"We are very much aware of the demographic developments that have led to the restructuring plan, of course," Ms. Wanner said in an email, "but, as far as I can tell, nobody was informed of the plan itself until it was a done deal, which I find troubling."

Details to Come

The plan, which must still be approved by the system's Board of Regents, would [merge](#) each of the state's 13 public two-year colleges with one of Wisconsin's seven four-year university campuses. For example, campuses in Manitowoc, Marinette, and Sheboygan would come under the administration of the university in Green Bay.

The two-year colleges would become branch campuses of the universities, said Cathy A. Sandeen, now chancellor of the colleges and the university's cooperative extension program. The reconstituted branch campuses would begin to offer more general-education and upper-level courses that can be applied to a baccalaureate degree. Associate degrees would bear the name of the university. Tuition for general-education courses at the branch campuses would remain lower.

Administrative operations would be streamlined under the proposal, providing more efficiency, said Ms. Sandeen, whose position as chancellor will end if the plan is approved. Under the proposal, the system's cooperative extension would be managed by the flagship in Madison and the online, competency-based "Flexible Option" program would be overseen by the system's central administration.

Over all, the consolidation would help the two-year colleges be financially sustainable and also would make it easier for Wisconsinites who live near the colleges to pursue a bachelor's degree, said Ms. Sandeen.

Data from the system show that enrollment at the two-year colleges has dropped by nearly a third since 2010. At some colleges, the decline over that period has exceeded 50 percent.

That trend seems likely to continue: Population projections for the state show that residents aged 18 to 64 are expected to increase just 0.4 percent by 2040.

Leading Edge

While other states are considering or carrying out mergers of colleges, the lessons from those measures remain limited. No state or system has yet carried out such a plan on the scale that Wisconsin is proposing.

Georgia [merged](#) 14 campuses to make the institutions more efficient and better serve residents of regions with growing populations. Still, officials there learned that the mergers may not have saved that much money.

Other states have taken a piecemeal approach. In March, for example, trustees of the University of Maine system voted to [merge](#) a financially troubled campus in Machias with the flagship in Orono. Last year, the Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees [voted](#) to merge the Lyndon and Johnson State Colleges.

Several proposals have been scuttled by controversy, such as a recommendation to put Rutgers University at Camden under control of Rowan University. In Pennsylvania, a draft report recommended not merging any of the state's 14 state-owned universities, despite widespread financial problems and [falling](#) enrollment at many campuses.

The breadth of Wisconsin's proposal and the number of gritty details to be worked out are considerable, including how instructors and staff at the two-year colleges will be integrated as employees at the universities. And issues of tenure and promotion will have to be negotiated for faculty members who may move from the university to the two-year colleges.

All of this could be more difficult given the years-long tensions between the system's leadership and its faculty and staff. In 2011, Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican, and the chancellor of the university in Madison at the time, Carolyn A. (Biddy) Martin, stirred controversy by proposing to [split](#) the flagship from the rest of the system.

State legislators nixed that idea but considered a broader plan for autonomy in 2015. That measure also largely [died](#) in the Legislature. Instead, lawmakers approved a \$250-million budget cut and controversial bills that stripped tenure and shared governance from protections in state law, leaving it to the regents to set new policies for the system on both fronts.

The board [enacted](#) those policies last year over the [objection](#) of faculty leaders, who argued that the new protections would leave professors vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal and would hamstring the system's faculty-recruitment efforts.

More recently, faculty have objected to new policies [punishing](#) students who disrupt speakers on campus and another that gives the regents more [power](#) in hiring administrators and allows candidates from outside academe.

Both of the most recent policies were approved without consulting shared-governance groups, said Ms. Wanner, chair of the University Committee. And there has been little sign that system leaders are including those groups in the plans going forward.

"So far," she wrote, the system "has only provided a feedback web form. Clearly, that is not enough."

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