http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/mining_wisconsin_senate_s5.jpg

This week, Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about details in Governor Walkers's budget bill that include Wisconsin-Minnesota Tuition Reciprocity, the Educational Approval Board and the Government Accountability Board. She believes these provisions should be removed from the budget bill and deliberated publicly on their merits.

MADISON - "I didn't know that was a part of the state budget," the parent told me.

That was the reciprocity agreement between Wisconsin and Minnesota to allow students from across state lines to attend public universities at in-state tuition costs. This arrangement saves students and parents out-of-state tuition costs.

The governor's budget removes state funds to pay for the tuition reciprocity program and tells University officials the program is optional.

Tuition costs vary at universities. Non-residents can pay as much as triple the tuition of in-state students. Generally the UW system is less expensive for in-state tuition so the program does cost Wisconsin.

Without funds in the state budget to pay for the program and in the face of $300 million in state cuts, it is unlikely officials will continue the agreement between the two states.

Eliminating the tuition reciprocity program will significantly increase tuition over a four-year degree for more than 20,000 students in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Also affecting certain college students and their families is the governor's proposal to abolish

the Educational Approval Board (EAB). This board sets standards for, and examines details of curriculum and facilities of, the for-profit colleges operating in Wisconsin.

Operating much in the background, the EAB currently inspects for-profit higher education schools, examines such areas as curriculum, professor qualifications, facilities, equipment. The board enforces rules to prevent fraud, misrepresentation and false advertising. The EAB sets standards for information schools must provide to students.

The board also protects students from schools that would take tuition payments and not deliver the promised education. Many of these schools exist on-line in other states. Students participate in classes on-line and communicate with professors and students thousands of miles away.

Eliminating the EAB also changes laws related to enforcement of words that protect the University of Wisconsin and the state Technical Colleges. One of the board's functions is to stop the unscrupulous for-profit school operator from appropriating the words "Wisconsin", "state", "college" or "university".

The governor's proposal would move a few of the EAB functions to a new state agency called the Department of Financial Institutions and Professional Standards. Under the governor's plan complaints about for-profit colleges would be handled by the Department of Ag, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

The effect of this agency shuffling and the elimination of the EAB are to rubber stamp at the state level any "accredited" for-profit "college" or "university." Placing enforcement for fraud on the already overworked staff at the Consumer Protection Division of DATCP is a way to keep the appearance of consumer protection without the real teeth that exist in current law.

Another function of state government that protects people – this time from unscrupulous public officials – is the Government Accountability Board (GAB).

Created in bipartisan action in 2007, the GAB oversees elections, lobbying, ethics of public officials and campaign finance. The agency has come under scrutiny by leaders of both parties,

which to me indicates the board is doing its job.

Recently the Legislative Audit Bureau released an audit showing among other findings, the GAB had embarked on setting up a new computer system to upgrade its many technological functions. The governor's budget would centralize all these information technology (IT) functions in the Department of Administration (DOA).

The DOA, often called by insiders the Department of ALL, is the right hand of the governor; his political appointee oversees all of its functions.

At risk is the integrity of the state's voter file including new voter registrations, provisional and absentee votes, updated poll lists and the canvas reporting system used by clerks to report election returns. Also at risk is the reporting system for disclosing campaign donations, lobbying activity and the financial relationships of elected or appointed officials.

Moving the computer functions of the nonpartisan GAB into the DOA is tantamount to setting the fox to guard the henhouse.

Many governors slip major changes into the budget bill to avoid public scrutiny. It's the job of the people's representatives –the legislature - to act now and get rid of these changes.