

Bravely Defending the Wisconsin Idea

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Senator Smith writes about Speaker Robin Vos and the Republicans' attempt to ransom UW employee pay raises and scrub DEI initiatives from the University of Wisconsin campuses.

MADISON - In September I wrote about Republicans gaslighting students into thinking they are being indoctrinated by universities. In other words, students are being told they are wrong for owning their vision of what the future holds for them and how they are shaping our society.

Over the weekend, the Board of Regents for the University of Wisconsin rejected Speaker Robin Vos' (R-Burlington) attempt to ransom pay raises for UW employees and a new engineering building at UW-Madison for pushing his conservative ideals across all our campuses. It was a brave move to reject this false choice between funding and striving for diverse, equitable and inclusive campuses and initiatives. Speaker Vos' rhetoric about the UW System has been mean-spirited and inaccurate. We are long overdue for someone to stand up against his tyrannical approach to governance.

The UW's primary job is to help young adults become ready to face the world they plan to live

in, work in and participate as an adult. The foundation of the University of Wisconsin is the Wisconsin Idea. It goes beyond just the classroom. The university system shapes our identity as a state, contributes to our nation and builds up our communities with students knowledgeable and capable to make a difference in our society.

DEI is a huge part of that mission – lifting up and offering access to everyone regardless of race, ability or sexual orientation ensures everyone has an opportunity to play a role in how our society looks today and in the future. It isn't just happening in Wisconsin, we've come to learn over decades that our country is stronger when everyone plays a part and has the opportunity to participate. Communities and businesses are finding DEI initiatives to be a core philosophy for progress. It should come to no one's surprise our UW schools are joining the movement.

Students must be ready and our universities are geared to meet the demand we are seeing across the country and the world...despite what Speaker Robin Vos wants. Wisconsin students have the most to lose from Republicans' misguided war on DEI, making students less prepared for the workforce and our progress closing the achievement gap will suffer. Our state contributes a lot of money for our universities and students pay far too much to not be prepared for what they need to be ready for.



Republicans desperately want a “win” by using the UW as their petri dish for conservative thought at the expense of students and university employees being used as bargaining chips. It isn't just about DEI. They've already used \$3 million in taxpayer money to create the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership (Speaker Vos is a member of their board) to expand conservative thought at UW-Madison. Now, one of Speaker Vos' demands states that he wants UW-Madison to seek philanthropic support to create an endowed chair to focus on conservative political thought, classical economic theory, or classical liberalism. For someone who continually says students are being indoctrinated, he certainly does his fair share of pushing his conservative agenda at our UW-System.



Wisconsin deserves better than someone hell-bent on holding UW hostage over his tirade about DEI. Regardless of how anyone sees the issue politically, the actions Speaker Vos has taken are similar to that of Senator Joe McCarthy when he was censured by the U.S. Senate for his baseless allegations against communists in the 1950s. In fact, in June of this year, Speaker Vos said he is embarrassed to be an alum of the UW-System. We should all be embarrassed by Speaker Vos tilting at windmills over DEI.

On the other side of this saga, students will continue to shape our society and we will reinvest in our diversity to strengthen our state and communities. We will unfortunately have to endure narrowmindedness and hatred, but we will endure.

My thoughts go out to our university employees and their families. Brave acts are not without consequences. I sincerely hope we can move past this and uplift our universities and the Wisconsin Idea they fiercely defend and promote.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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