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## Burning Questions: UW-Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells looks for university to grow amid tough times

*The Post-Crescent*

Trying to educate as many students as possible and giving them the quality of education they need to succeed is a tough balancing act for University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells.

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Add the certainty of budget cuts because of the state's financial mess and the problem becomes more difficult.

But that's the situation Wells, UW-Oshkosh and all UW System schools are in. Under Gov. Jim Doyle's budget plan, state funding for the UW System would be cut \$174 million. Since the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee, which decides on a budget bill to send to the full Senate and Assembly, has started its work, that number has been trimmed a little.

UW-Oshkosh's share of the cuts would be about \$7.2 million over the two years of the budget. If tuition is raised the expected 5 percent to 6 percent, Oshkosh's hole goes down to \$5.2 million.

In an interview with The Post-Crescent on Monday, Wells discussed the fiscal situation, as well as UW-Oshkosh's present and future:

On how he looks at deficit situations:

People want to know, "What are you going to cut? What are you going to cut?" My response is, "No, what are you going to protect? What are you going to enhance? How are you going to move forward?"

Don't freeze, because if you freeze, you sink. We use all those metaphors. When the seas are troubled, the pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist thinks it's going to go away and the realist adjusts the sails. We've been adjusting our sails.

We would like to see the cuts reduced. The System had to face \$174 million in cuts. We thought we were going to only have \$100 million in cuts to deal with. Then things got worse and the governor had another cut across the board, which added another \$50 million to our cuts. And then he added another one-time \$25 million cut to the auxiliary funds on the student side to fund the good idea to exempt people who make \$60,000 and under from the tuition increases, which are likely to be 5½ percent to 6 percent a year. So that's \$174 million. ...

When we brought to their attention that roughly \$10 million of the cuts we're cutting funds that people privately give us to enhance things, or they were being funded through a federal grant or contract, the Joint Finance Committee and the governor's folks said, "Oh, we didn't mean to do that. Your cut's down to \$164 million." ...

What they also did was reduced that \$25 million one-time cut by about \$8 million. So where we sit now is we're down from \$174 million to \$156 million.

On UW-Oshkosh's capital projects:

One of the largest construction sites, if not the largest, construction sites in terms of job generation is the UW-Oshkosh campus. It will be that way the next three years, as well.

We already started a \$6 million renovation of an old Cub Foods store to relocate facilities maintenance because that's the site of the \$48 million academic building, which will go under construction this fall, as well as the Elmwood Commons renovation and addition, which is another \$8.5 million.

Then there's a new residence hall, which will be under construction a year from now. That's going to create thousands of jobs, directly and indirectly, throughout northeast Wisconsin.

That's something I like to pitch but I also want to remind people this is long overdue at comprehensive universities in Wisconsin. Oshkosh is the state's third-largest university, with 12,700 students. With enrollment projections, it looks like we're going to have another 200 to 300 additional students.

We haven't had a free-standing academic building built on the state's third-largest campus since 1971. So it's about time that this happened. We've added 1,000 students just in the last six or seven years and now we're going to be adding several hundred more as part of the growth agenda up the road.

On UW-Oshkosh's impact:

Most people know that a research university like Madison, world-class and all of us hugely proud of it, and an up-and-coming major urban research university like UW-Milwaukee are fundamental for economic development and recovery. They tend not to understand that what I call the greater Wisconsin public universities, the universities outside Madison and Milwaukee have huge importance to the state.

Those institutions collectively, including the UW Colleges, serve over 100,000 of the 170,000 students in the System. They're hugely important for the regions they sit in. There's no single more important institution in northeast Wisconsin than the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. It's not just Oshkosh's university. ...

What we're trying to do on our campus is say, "Look, this is still an uncertain environment. It's going to require us to continue to be innovative and entrepreneurial in how we do things. It's going to require us to make the case that we've always been part of the solution. We're not an expenditure. We create as much economic activity and taxes than we get from the state.

It's not just the presence of the institution that creates that. More important to us is what we're doing in terms of educating the workforce, employees and employers and helping businesses. So we need to keep focused on that because, the better job we do of that and the better job we do of being creative and innovative ourselves, the less hard it is going to be for us to get through the 2011-13 budget. Not that we're not concerned about now, but we're a lot more concerned about what 11-13 is going to bring.

On how he sees the university's mission:

In past budgets, we first talk about what we're going to protect. We're protecting seats in classes. We have an obligation to make sure we do everything we can so our students can keep moving through the degree program. ...

People are concerned about quality, and then access. You're public, so how do you balance access and quality? And that's the right issue for us to struggle with. Where's the optimum balance between access and quality? Access without quality in a public institution is no access at all. A lot of in academia in a public (university) like to hear that but they don't like to hear the corollary to that, which I say a lot, quality with no access for a public university is unacceptable. We're a public university. ...

How do you keep your public services going at the maximum level you can with as much quality as you can? Because it's a hard thing. I'll admit I'm a little more on the access side, and then saying, "Let's figure out how we can keep the quality going."

What we like to do with the public and our legislators and the press is say, "Don't give us the funding. We're going to cut back on enrollment. We're going to freeze admissions. We're going to serve 3,000 fewer students. The sky's going to come down if we don't do this."

I think it's important for us to honestly tell you what problems these are causing for us and it does threaten it and why tuition is going up. The cost isn't going up as much as the price is going up. Why is the price going up? Because states around the country are not able to keep up their traditional obligation. So why can't the universities just accept the cuts and not raise the tuition? Talk about a quality problem you have now ...

So it's really trying to make sure you balance those things in a budget priority. Keep those seats in the classes. How can we do that? ...

I tell everybody on campus, "If you know anybody who can't graduate because they can't get in a class and they're going to have to come back another semester, you can send them to me. We'll get them graduated. Whatever they need, we'll figure out a way to get them through." Because that extra semester is going to lead to extra costs.

Those are the principles that we look at. How are we going to protect things and enhances things?

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