



May 15, 2020

To: UW System Chancellors

From: UW System Women's and Gender Studies Consortium Advisory Board

Dear UW System Chancellors,

We join groups across the UW System in protesting the "Blueprint for UW-System Beyond COVID-19" released by President Ray Cross last week. In addition to the opposition voiced by AAUP-Wisconsin, AFT-Wisconsin, individual campus leadership teams, and local representatives, we have concerns specific to the project of gender and LGBTQ+ equity and inclusion across the UW System, and the far-reaching implications this proposal has for first generation students, students of color, women, LGBTQ+ students, and other underrepresented groups.

The UW System Women's and Gender Studies Consortium (WGSC) exists as a mechanism for supporting the project of gender equity, sexuality studies, diversity, and inclusion across all UW System campuses. Since the late 1980s, our advisory board has worked closely with administrators on each campus in support of [Regent's Policy 14-3](#) regarding the elimination of discrimination based on gender. Section G of this policy specifically requires women's and gender studies (WGS) courses on each campus, including the active recruitment and retention of faculty trained in the area of gender studies as a means of ensuring equal access to women's and gender studies programming for all students. Our advisory board, composed of department chairs and program coordinators in WGS from every campus, meets bi-annually to support this initiative, and has worked closely to preserve and develop WGS programming on each campus for over thirty years. As such, the WGSC is in a strong position to provide context on the implications of this proposal, both for the project of gender equity and intersectional inclusivity for students, staff, and faculty of all backgrounds.

1. The FWD 20/20 vision set forth by the UW System emphasizes the need for closing the opportunity gap for minority students, promoting cultural fluency, supporting diversity, and focusing on student retention, success, and degree completion. **What we have learned from other cycles of institutional consolidation and budgetary constraints is that smaller programs grounded in the tenets of inclusivity and diversity are disproportionately impacted by these type of retrenchments: women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, and the humanities.** These are the same programs that consistently attract and support the underrepresented groups FWD 20/20 seeks to support, and provide the pedagogical models and the analytical tools students need to participate in the type of multicultural society and globalized world the UW System mission supports and celebrates.
2. On a related note, **the project of consolidating programs and degree offerings across the UW System runs the risk of creating an access and equity issue for students attending smaller comprehensive institutions.** Students at UW-Superior or UW-Stevens Point should have the same ability to attend in-person classes in gender and women's studies, queer studies, African

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American Studies, and other ethnic studies programs as their peers at R-1 campuses. Eliminating these courses entirely or only offering them in an online format undermines the vitality and quality of educational experiences available to students from more rural parts of the state, many of which are students of color or first generation students. Additionally, many of the instructors for these courses also come from underrepresented groups, thus creating an employment discrimination issue across the UW System.

3. **The interaction between campuses and their surrounding communities is a cornerstone of both the Wisconsin Idea and FWD 20/2020, a focus that crucially supports the vitality of the state of Wisconsin.** The blueprint threatens to undermine this long-standing relationship by potentially eliminating degree programs such as gender and women's studies which not only support local communities with internship and outreach activities, but also provide a constant stream of graduates prepared to enter the workforce with a sophisticated lens of gender equity, multiculturalism, diversity, and globalization. The consolidation model risks eliminating some of the degree offerings most supported by local communities while also reducing the amount of opportunities faculty and students have to support the growth of local non-profits and businesses through public talks, internships, and other research initiatives—a primary focus of many gender and women's studies programs. It also goes without saying that jobs across the UW-System are vital to the strength of local economies, and the elimination of jobs will have reverberations across the region, particularly impacting the commerce of smaller communities. This move also increases income inequality in many Wisconsin communities—immediately and in the future—by reducing the amount of families who can afford and have access to higher education. The role of higher education is to narrow the income gap, not widen it.
4. In our most recent review of emergency online instruction, **the WGSC observed an equity issue inherent in a mode of instruction that rests entirely on online delivery.** While the flexibility of online learning can offer benefits for some non-traditional students, it also becomes an access issue for students who do not have the resources needed to fully engage in an online learning community: safe and secure housing, technology, Internet access, and a quiet space free of disruption. It also creates additional barriers for international students and those seeking financial aid for course assistance. Inherently, we are concerned that a consolidated online delivery model will reduce the number of students from underrepresented groups who can fully participate in a well-rounded selection of course offerings. We are also deeply concerned that recruitment and retention will suffer as a result, a situation that is both antithetical to the project of student success and the long-term financial viability of the UW System.
5. Finally, **on many campuses gender and women's studies exists as the only remaining vehicle for promoting gender equity, protections for queer and transgender students, and other intersectional initiatives, including support of projects such as gender-neutral restrooms, accessible spaces for people with disabilities, and the availability of childcare and lactation rooms.** Our programs and departments provide students with the analytical tools they need to understand how societal systems of gender discrimination interface with racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and other systems of oppression. In addition to creating a devastating public health issue, COVID-19 has laid bare many of these intersectional inequities in situations of domestic violence and abuse, gendered and racialized health disparities, unequal access to safe jobs and health care, and the disproportionate burdens of childcare falling on women and female-headed households. At this political moment, research and academic

instruction that prioritizes gender and sexuality as a category of intersectional analysis is needed more than ever.

Accordingly, we join other faculty, academic staff, students, community members, and government leaders in calling upon our campus leadership to call for the immediate withdrawal of the “Blueprint for the UW System Beyond COVID-19.” As others have pointed out, the proposal bypasses the very shared governance procedures each campus needs to address its own unique situation and preserve institutional autonomy, and silences the voices of students, staff, faculty, and local communities most affected by its long-term implications. Instead, we support an immediate state and federal financial infusion into higher education and protections for contingent faculty and other academic workers, a move that will preserve the vitality of our academic institutions and local communities. While we write on behalf of gender and women’s studies programs and departments from across the state, we are in solidarity with all interdisciplinary programs that position ethnicity, diversity, and inclusion as a primary focus.

**Adopted and Approved by:**

[The Advisory Board of the UW System Women’s and Gender Studies Consortium](#)