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State Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities

Testimony for Assembly Bill 370

Guaranteeing admission to University of Wisconsin System institutions and requiring schools to prepare class rankings for certain pupils.

"Retaining Wisconsin's Best & Brightest"

Good morning and thank you Mr. Chairman for providing us an opportunity to address this issue with the Committee today. I am joined by co-author Sen. Rachel Cabral-Guevera, and other speakers who are impacted by this bill in a variety of ways.

We are pleased to introduce this bill to the Wisconsin Legislature to ensure that our "best and brightest High School graduates" will be admitted to the UW System School or Technical College of their choice right here in Wisconsin.

A number of our students, families, High School Principals, and School Administrators have shared disappointing reports of how a number of our top-performing High School graduates – those who would rank in the top 5% of their classes - cannot gain admission to one of our UW System schools.

This rejection is the result of the undisclosed UW System formula that can leave Wisconsin's best and brightest out of our schools. The Chairman has requested this formula in the past and the UW provided a redacted response¹ that avoided answering the question as to how the UW System determines who qualifies for admission and on what terms. This makes no sense.

The bottom line is that we are losing too many of our "best and brightest" High School graduates to neighboring colleges and universities. Is this not a form of institutionalized brain drain? Our UW campuses are rightfully proud of the post-graduate retention rate for out-of-state college graduates who choose to remain in Wisconsin after graduation.

This is also true of those Wisconsin students who end up in an out-of-state college. Once that student leaves Wisconsin for another state, there is an increased likelihood that when they graduate from college, they will not return to Wisconsin, where they would become long-term contributing members of our communities.

We do not have to watch idly by as the future leaders of our state leave and never return. AB-370 ensures that the top five percent of students Wisconsin has to offer will be guaranteed a seat at a University of Wisconsin or Wisconsin Technical College campus of their choice.

The purpose of this bill is to provide a pathway for guaranteed admission for the "Top Five Percent" of our High School scholastic performers. The highlights include:

- Under this bill, Boards for public schools, choice schools, private schools, homeschoolers, and tribal schools will establish a method for ranking pupils based on ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT ONLY. Considerations will include the pupil's Grade Point Average, SAT or ACT exam scores, course work, and other measures of academic achievement or scholastic merit to determine who qualifies for the Top 5% of graduates. There will be no further qualifiers allowed in this scholastic determination.
- For UW System institutions, the program admission benefit applies only to applicants as first-year undergraduate students. The UW System schools will be required to grant admission to these students.

Our goal is to increase our capture rate of Wisconsin's "best and brightest" for our colleges and universities that later make Wisconsin their long-term home after receiving their degree from one of our UW or Tech Schools. When that happens all of Wisconsin wins.



RACHAEL A. CABRAL-GUEVARA

STATE SENATOR • 19TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities

Senator Rachael Cabral-Guevara

September 7, 2023

Chairman Murphy and members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities, thank you for allowing me to testify on Assembly Bill 370, an important piece of legislation that will restore fairness and transparency to Wisconsin's public college admissions.

Our public colleges and universities were built and are maintained with billions of dollars from Wisconsin taxpayers and tuition paying families. In return, the people of our state have been greeted with rejection letters and walls of secrecy hiding why perfectly qualified students are being turned away, often to attend school in another state and leave Wisconsin forever. This is not a good return on our investment. This is not the commitment to openness and understanding that we expect from institutions of higher learning. In short, this is a failure of colleges and universities to uphold their mission.

Assembly Bill 370 provides a simple fix to do what our public colleges and universities should already be doing: admit the best and brightest students in a transparent way. Our bill sets clear expectations for students to meet in order to gain admission to the public school of their choice. Any student ranked in the top of their class, as detailed in the bill, is guaranteed a seat at a public college or university of their choice in Wisconsin.

It's impossible to work toward a goal that no one knows about except an anonymous admissions officer. Right now, hardworking families and students across Wisconsin are scrambling to meet these invisible benchmarks. That's not democratic. That's not fair. Wisconsin families deserve better and our bill does just that.

While I taught at UW–Oshkosh, I was appalled at the admissions processes that were being used. I know firsthand how the veil of secrecy surrounding these admissions processes can be abused. I've also seen the reports provided to this committee last session from UW–Madison outlining their admissions process, which was more redacted than a CIA report.

No process is perfect and I'm sure you'll hear just that from the University of Wisconsin today. However, the process outlined in the bill is far better than the one currently being used that they won't even tell us about as public officials in charge of overseeing and funding them. This bill in front of you is an important step in the right direction.



WISCONSIN
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities

2023 Assembly Bill 370

Guaranteed admission to University of Wisconsin System institutions and technical colleges

September 7, 2023

Chairman Murphy and members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities:

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony for information only on Assembly Bill 370 related to guaranteed admission to University of Wisconsin System institutions and technical colleges. The University of Wisconsin-Madison shares the goal of the authors in ensuring that the best and brightest students in Wisconsin know they have a place at our public institutions of higher education but have several concerns with the legislation in its current form.

UW-Madison employs a holistic admissions process that takes into consideration several different criteria when reviewing applications. First and foremost, admissions counselors are looking for academic excellence reflected through coursework and grades. Beyond academics, the Admissions team looks for qualities such as leadership, concern for others and the community, achievement in the arts and athletics, and potential for contribution to the UW-Madison community. This process is balanced with three major enrollment goals in mind: first, the campus meets the Board of Regents requirement to enroll 5,200 first year and transfer students from Wisconsin and Minnesota, second to enroll a class that includes students from all corners of our state, and third, to enroll approximately 1,000 transfer students.

The landscape of high school opportunities varies widely across our state with schools and school districts providing the best educational experiences they can given their local needs and resources. Our holistic process is intended to acknowledge these differences across high schools. Each applicant to the UW-Madison receives a minimum of two reads by different application reviewers. These holistic reads attempt to account for a student's academic performance in the context of what their school offers noting that what is offered in one high school or county is not necessarily offered to the same extent at every other high school or county.

A typical admitted student will have demonstrated four years of English and math, 3-4 years of social studies, science, a world language, and two years of fine arts. As a required part of the holistic review, applicants can share more about themselves through two essays. SAT and ACT scores can be submitted as supplemental material. Our admissions requirements, process, and timelines are frequently communicated to schools and school districts and community-based organizations engaged in the college going process.

UW-Madison Office of Admissions & Recruitment prides itself on establishing relationships with high schools across Wisconsin and beyond. The goal is to account for the wide variety of educational opportunities present across the state and the desire to capture wide representation from talented and impressive graduates from all 72 Wisconsin counties. Admissions staff are familiar with the course offerings in school districts in urban, suburban,

and rural districts alike. These considerations are considered when deciding whether to admit a student.

The bill in its current form is unworkable for several reasons: first, it requires K-12 schools to rank their students in a shared way that does not fully account for the many different reasons that schools and school districts have chosen to their own systems. It essentially limits or removes what schools and school districts across the state have deliberately elected to do with weighting GPAs, providing class rank and how they present their transcripts. Currently, not all schools and school districts rank their students or provide what is referred to as a “weighted” grade point average (GPA). In fact, many of our larger schools and school districts deliberately do not participate in a GPA weighting or ranking systems after determining that it was not best for their particular environment. Requiring a ranking system will not only require that schools and school boards determine how best to approach a nuanced and detailed process, but it would also require understanding, if not agreement, among parents who have already set the academic course of their students, many of whom have taken courses or sets of coursework that they cannot retroactively change. To be clear, this is not an impossible change. But it is more complicated than it might appear and one that deserves very careful consideration of the costs as well as the benefits.

Furthermore, and even more concerning, the proposal suggests that this ranking could be based on a mixture of GPA and standardized test scores, along with other types of scholastic merit that remain undefined in the bill. There is no clean or easy way to blend together these different components. Furthermore, this would look very different at high schools across the state. Some would use weighted or unweighted GPA, some would potentially incorporate test scores – and if so, this would mean that rankings at that school could radically change after every testing opportunity, meaning that students would never fully know where they stood, no matter their course load or their academic achievements--some would use other criteria. For context, Texas is the only other state that has guaranteed admission based solely on rank. However, they have consistent ranking, grading and transcript systems across all K-12 schools. For this incoming freshman class at UW-Madison, only 28% of students provided class rank in their application. Of those who provided class rank, 68% of those incoming first-year students are from the top 15% of their class. Most of those below the 15 percent mark came from highly resourced schools where a great many students pursue extremely rigorous course loads and show high academic strength.

Second, the current bill provides guaranteed admission for homeschool students or online students based on standardized test alone. This is extremely problematic from our perspective. Test scores standing alone are not an effective measure of college success. Also, UW-Madison values and appreciates the unique experiences and strengths that homeschooled applicants bring to our campus and student body. They often have access to highly rigorous and personalized courses that delve deeply into the student’s specific areas of interest. We currently have guidance for homeschooled students that requires submitting of additional information that can help admissions counselors put each student’s-educational journey into context and help assess the level of rigor the student reached. A proposal for homeschooled students driven solely by test scores would not be educationally sound or fair. It might even incentivize those who are very strong test takers to move from a school setting to homeschooling, and we should be worried about an admissions approach that might generate such incentives.

As previously mentioned, a typical admitted student at UW-Madison will have demonstrated academic success in a necessary range of high school courses, including multiple years of math, English, science, social studies, a world language, among other classes. Further, Regent policy requires a set of given courses for admission to UW institutions. Assembly Bill 370 does not include any requirements that students receiving guaranteed admission take the suggested number of years in these courses. That would obviously be critical to any guaranteed admission program.

For all these reasons, we have significant concerns with this bill and believe that in current form it does not serve

our state or our shared goals. However, notwithstanding our concerns with this bill in its current form, we also wish to say clearly that UW-Madison shares the goal of the authors and others to ensure that the best and brightest Wisconsin students can attend their state's flagship campus. We are willing to engage in that discussion to create something that is both workable for our universities and achieves these goals.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on the impact this legislation would have on UW-Madison. If you have questions, please reach out to UW-Madison Senior Director of State Relations Crystal Potts (crystal.potts@wisc.edu; 608-265-4105).



Office of Government Relations

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DATE: September 7, 2023

TO: Members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities

FROM: UW System Office of Government Relations

RE: Written Testimony on Assembly Bill 370

Thank you, Chair Murphy and committee members, for giving the UW System (UWS) an opportunity to provide testimony on Assembly Bill 370 (AB 370).

It is often said that there is a place for everyone at the University of Wisconsin System. Systemwide, in-state students had an acceptance rate of 94% for the new freshman fall class of 2023. Nine of our four-year campuses had an acceptance rate of 95% or higher for in-state students. Every two-year branch campus had an in-state acceptance rate of 99% or higher, with the vast majority accepting 100% of all applicants. UWS provides virtually every interested Wisconsin student an opportunity to attend one of our institutions.

In addition to UWS's high acceptance rates for in-state students, a Direct Admissions Task Force charged with exploring the feasibility of a direct admissions program across UW System was created by the Board of Regents (BOR) last year. Direct admissions is a program that will proactively offer admissions to qualifying high school students based on their high school GPA and academic coursework, demonstrating UWS's effort and commitment to keeping our best and brightest in state. Interested UWS campuses can opt in to phase I of this program for the fall class of 2025. Phase I school districts and their high school juniors at those schools will also have to opt in to participate. High school students who opted in to the phase I program will begin to receive direct admissions offer letters in July 2024 for fall 2025 admission. Also, UW-Green Bay is currently piloting a direct admissions program for the 2023-24 academic year. UW-Green Bay's program automatically admits all graduates of the local school district to UW-Green Bay. UWS's intent is that a direct admissions program will expand statewide over the next few years. UWS is working hard to ensure Wisconsin's top high school graduates are given a spot at one of our campuses.

UWS wants to ensure we recruit and retain Wisconsin's top students. That is why as part of our 2023-28 Strategic Plan, we have a goal of increasing our number of graduates by 10%, from 37,000 degrees conferred to 41,000 by 2028. Also, we have made a strong commitment to increasing enrollment by increasing the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in our universities.

AB 370 would require the UWS and Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) to establish a guaranteed admission program for Wisconsin applicants in the top 5 percent of their high school class. The UWS already provides virtually every Wisconsin student access to one of our 13

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universities. This bill does not contain ranking criteria for high schools so it is unclear how consistent statewide rankings would be established. AB 370 also does not consider campus capacity limits. The UWS is already accomplishing this bill's intent, and will continue to increase access through our piloting of a direct admissions program, while balancing campus capacity.

The UWS prides itself as being the home to approximately 161,000 students who are obtaining a world-class education right here in Wisconsin. We will continue to recruit the best and the brightest throughout Wisconsin who will add to the state's workforce upon graduation.

Again, thank you for giving the UWS an opportunity to submit testimony today.