

State budget reductions impact UW-River Falls

April 26, 2016--The impact of reductions in state support for the University of Wisconsin System, approved last July as part of the 2015-2017 state budget, are being reported by UW campuses. Recently, each of the 13 four-year universities as well as UW Colleges and Extension provided a written summary of impacts to the UW Board of Regents. A campus-by-campus summary of impacts is available at <http://www.wisconsinbudgetproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/April-Campus-Budget-Update.pdf>.

At UW-River Falls, the 2015-2017 state budget approved by the legislature and Governor resulted in a \$2.87 million base budget cut, representing an 11.2% reduction in base state support. Also, as part of the budget bill, undergraduate tuition was frozen for 2015-2017, extending the tuition freeze for a total of four years. The primary use of state and tuition funds is to support faculty and staff who work directly with students. At UW-River Falls, the budget cuts have resulted in a reduction of 55 state/tuition-supported positions, including 18 permanent layoffs or non-retentions. Since 1974-1975, the balance between funding of core educational costs at UW-River Falls has shifted from 79% state funds and 21% tuition, to 28% state funds and 72% tuition in 2015-2016, as shown in the graph.

UW-River Falls Chancellor Dean Van Galen has expressed concern over the impacts of state budget reductions coupled with a tuition freeze.

“Like other UW institutions, we have been forced to increase our class sizes, decrease course availability, and have seen the departure of some very talented and committed faculty and staff,” said Chancellor Van Galen. “I believe that Wisconsinites still hold education as a core value, and it is important for the public to understand that the impact of these cuts on our students and our campuses are very real, and risk damaging the very public universities that are a key to the future of Wisconsin and its citizens.”

The UW System has been criticized for its level of reserve funds.

“The university’s current tuition reserves could support faculty salaries and other educational costs for less than two months,” said UWRF Assistant Chancellor for Business and Finance Elizabeth Frueh. “Other fund balances in areas such as housing, parking, construction projects, and dining services are committed for specific projects or uses, and cannot be used to fund faculty or support basic teaching and learning activities.”

State funding for capital projects such as the UWRF Falcon Center project cannot be used to address shortfalls in state operational funding through the 2015-2017 budget. The Falcon Center is supported by capital funds from the state, student fees, charitable gifts, and parking “user fees.”

Many of the layoffs and reductions in staff at UWRF occurred last year in areas such as technology services, human resources, financial aid, athletics and the registrar’s office. The budget reductions have also impacted academic programs. Most recently, modern languages, art, music, and other programs have had to reduce teaching staff and course offerings for the fall 2016 semester. Kris Butler, chair of the Modern Languages Department, said she intends to retire at the end of this academic year in part to save money so that the department will have the ability to offer French and German for one more year allowing students currently enrolled in the major to complete their degrees.

Although UW-River Falls made a concerted effort to implement their budget cuts in a way that would maintain the core mission of teaching and learning as the highest priority, this latest round of cuts has led to some impacts being felt by the students.

“With recent budget cuts affecting the university, I’m concerned I will not be able to complete my major within four years here at UWRF,” said student Janelle Olson, a sophomore marketing communications major. “I know for many students, adding an additional year (or more) of schooling is a big deal financially as well as personally, because we all want to advance to an adult life and real-world jobs after college.”

For years, UW-River Falls has distinguished itself for the quality of its graduates as they transition to first-time jobs, or graduate or professional school. The institution is recognized as a key part of talent development in this region.

“UWRF is an extraordinarily student-centered university, has prepared its graduates well, and is deeply connected to River Falls, Hudson and the entire St. Croix Valley,” said Chancellor Van Galen. “Through initiatives such as the Hudson Center, the St. Croix Valley Business Incubator, and new academic programs in agricultural engineering, data science, and neuroscience, the university is striving to be responsive to the needs of our state and our students.”

“Our role, however, is not only to produce talent that benefits our state and region,” Chancellor Van Galen continued. “A UW comprehensive campus like ours is truly here to help prepare students to become engaged, ethical citizens for the entire course of their lives. State budget cuts, in conjunction with a tuition freeze, inhibit our ability to do this. We need our alumni and community members who care about education and this university to stand up and support us now, more than ever.”

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Graph attached.