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A Concerted Attack on Higher Education and the Common Good in Wisconsin

A series of recent actions taken by Governor Scott Walker, the Wisconsin state legislature, and the University of Wisconsin system board of regents represents a concerted attack on the university as a public good and on the university's role in fostering democratic participation. The stewards of the university system appear determined to destroy it.

In 2011, Governor Walker proposed, and the legislature passed, Act 10, curtailing the system faculty's rights to negotiate collectively. In 2015, the legislature severely weakened tenure, shared governance, and due process—and, by extension, academic freedom. The board launched its own salvo earlier this month, approving an anti-free-speech proposal allowing for the expulsion of students for "disrupting the free speech of others," announcing a plan to merge the system's two- and four-year institutions, and changing the procedures governing searches for chancellors and presidents—all without meaningful faculty input. Troublingly, the new search procedures put virtually the entire process of hiring new 'campus CEOs' in the hands of the very regents who seek to undermine the public obligation of the university, with limited roles for other campus constituencies. At the time of this writing, there is also a bill before the state legislature that would abolish a partnership that allowed university employees to work and train students at Planned Parenthood.

These actions constitute a brazen partisan assault on the Wisconsin Idea, the century-old notion that public higher education is a common good that exists for the benefit of the state's people. They also exemplify a broader crisis in American public higher education, described in a recent AAUP investigative report as "occasioned by headstrong, thoughtless action by politically appointed regents who lack any respect for the faculties of the institutions over which they preside." Nowhere in the country is this more evident than in Wisconsin.

We therefore call on the Wisconsin system board of regents to cease its attacks on the institutions it stewards; to recognize tenure, faculty governance, due process, and academic freedom as foundational to higher education; to support and encourage free speech for faculty and students; and to govern the system's institutions for the common good of the people of Wisconsin.