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Rep. Gary Hebl's statement on search for the next UW Systems President

(Sun Prairie) – Yesterday, the presidential search committee for UW System announced that it picked just one finalist in its quest to replace retiring President Ray Cross. Rep. Gary Hebl, a member of the Assembly Committee on Education, released the following statement:

I am very concerned that the UW System, one of the largest and most prestigious public higher education systems in the country, was only able to bring in one finalist in its search for a new president. I understand that the COVID-19 pandemic must have hindered the search considerably, but perhaps we should take that as an opportunity to reset and try a new search when we are able to consider a broader swath of candidates.

A new search might be especially fitting as the one finalist, Jim Johnsen, does not appear to represent what an ideal UW System President should be. Already he has shown a heavy hand in dealing with chancellors in Alaska- [sending them a memo](#) demanding any communications from the chancellors regarding budget issues conform to what the Regents and President Johnsen determine they must say. He also sent a follow up memo apparently threatening their jobs, saying "If you are unable to support the Board's decision or implementation efforts, or cannot commit to our approach or these expectations, please advise me in writing immediately so that we may arrange for a smooth transition."

In addition to this apparent stifling of chancellor's independence, the faculty at the University of Alaska-Anchorage and University of Alaska-Fairbanks passed votes of no confidence in Johnsen in 2017, with Anchorage reaffirming that vote in October 2019. Installing as President someone who does not have the support of the faculty in his current position is a grave mistake and a warning signal of the potential relations with UW faculty.

I hope that the search can start again, and that the UW System is able to choose between a number of candidates who are able to represent the ideals of the UW System. If the search committee is unwilling to do that and ultimately makes Johnsen UW Systems President, I think it would be appropriate in the near future for the Board of Regents to rethink whether or not they want to retain Johnsen.

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