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The AFT-Wisconsin Higher Education Council Stands against the Anti-Democratic UW System President Search

The AFT-Wisconsin Higher Education Council stands with the activists across the nation calling for community control over policing so that the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the many similar tragedies of recent years, become a thing of the past. Changing our system of policing is not enough to rectify the injustices that exist in our society, however. We must also include our institutions of higher education. The HEC calls on every university stakeholder on every campus in Wisconsin to take this moment to reflect upon the vast inequalities that characterize higher education in our state.

Today, the UW System Board of Regents is interviewing the sole finalist for the position of the next UW System president. Moving forward with a process in which there is only one candidate for a position that serves over 160,000 students a year and employs almost 40,000 employees is grossly inappropriate. Even more in this current moment, in which the political response to COVID-19 fundamentally threatens public higher education; even more in this moment, when activists across this country march against police violence and institutional racism, this anti-democratic, behind closed doors process is wrong. This search process represents a microcosm of what we are seeing across the country: it is an attempt to perpetuate a failed status quo in which too few Americans participate in vitally important decisions about their own future.

A search process in which the only finalist is a white male also reflects the fact that higher education has not included African Americans and other minorities as first-class citizens. From federal funding for land grant colleges in the 1860s that funded almost exclusively white institutions through the GI Bill, which typically only funded the education of Black GIs when they attended under-resourced, segregated schools, there is a long history of excluding black people from access to higher education. Though our society has taken some meaningful steps in rectifying these injustices in recent years, the statistics in today's universities speak for themselves. Black people represent a disproportionately low number of overall students, and they graduate at lower rates than white students. Faculty and staff of color are similarly under-represented, and minorities often disproportionately perform the labor of mentoring students of color and serving to highlight campus diversity.

Our campuses need to change, and not only to rectify racial inequities. Too many students of limited means—black, white, Latino, Native, and Asian—find it difficult to pay the costs of college, and find it more difficult to thrive when they are there. Female students are



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disproportionately traumatized by sexual assault and harassment that goes unacknowledged and unpunished. To truly solve the egregious inequalities that exist in higher education, we must democratize our universities.

To put forward a single candidate for public scrutiny, and not a set of candidates that reflects the diversity of our state and campuses is, by itself, deeply anti-democratic. But it is even more so since this candidate comes from the Alaska system, where faculty has voted no-confidence on multiple occasions, because he sought to narrow the academic options for students without consulting campus stakeholders. The HEC is deeply concerned that unilaterally limiting academic options means cuts to ethnic studies, women studies, Black studies, the social sciences, and other arts and humanities programs that provide a valuable educational component in fighting racism and sexism. Combined with Ray Cross's blueprint, which flaunts the fact that it will limit academic options for the disproportionately low-income and first-generation students at the regional comprehensive campuses, this hire would exacerbate the inequalities that already exist on our campuses.

Our unions stand for inclusion, equal access, and democracy. We call on the UW Board of Regents to reject Jim Johnsen as a candidate for UW System President and to declare a failed search. We also call on the UW Board of Regents to restart the search process using a diverse group of faculty, staff, and students in all parts of the formal searching, screening, and nominating processes, with particular attention to ensure that candidates are committed to upholding principles of racial equity.

For more information about the Higher Education Council, AFT-Wisconsin, or how you can get involved in your campus union, contact Jon Shelton, AFT-W Vice President for Higher Education: jonshelton24@gmail.com