

The restructuring of the UW Colleges and Extension system, which restructured the UW Colleges into branch campuses of four-year universities, and folded the UW Extension into UW System and UW System Administration, was a massive undertaking. Taking several years of planning, timelines, meetings, and transfers of information, the process has encompassed a vast scope related to the culture of entities within the UW System, the functions of administration at different levels within the UW System, and how these concepts collide within the restructuring of one such entity – the UW Colleges and Extension. In this report, I will expand on how different pieces of the culture and structure of the UW Colleges and Extension created a unique environment, as well as the factors that changed this environment in the context of higher education more generally.

Regionalization and Understanding the former UW Colleges

One piece of information about the UW Colleges that became very important to the project was the emphasis placed on regionalization in relation to restructuring. Many interviewees have emphasized its regionalized model in relation to how the UW Colleges utilized its resources both centrally and locally. Many of the UW Colleges interviewees were also involved in the process of regionalization as well, and saw this model as central to how the UW Colleges operated, its place within the UW System, and the context in which it should be understood.

The concept of regionalization, as well as many of the more abstract feelings and understanding of how the UW Colleges operated, are complex. Through this project, I have gained an immense amount of respect for the individuals that chose to work at the UW Colleges and Extension – for many of those that I interviewed, working at the UW Colleges was not simply a career, it was part of a belief system that administrators were proud of.

Working with non-traditional students that faced barriers to access at four-year universities, many of those I interviewed were passionate about the mission of the former UW Colleges, and felt that their role within the UW System as part of the UW Colleges was essential to higher education as it tied to the belief systems of Wisconsinites. In his interview, UW Colleges Associate Dean for Administration and Finance Dan Anhalt said, “I love working with first-generation college students. It’s so much fun. You could have a seventeen year-old young lady who has a child who’s trying to go to college. That’s not a traditional student, right? She’s dealing with a whole separate list of issues that somebody who’s twenty-five and single is dealing with. Yeah, so our demographics were pretty cool.”¹ This was something that UW System Vice President of Administration Rob Cramer noted as well, stating that “the faculty at UW Colleges were really passionate about their access mission and providing really strong support for the students.”²

¹ Dan Anhalt, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2019, OH #1918, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Anhalt.D.1918.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

² Robert Cramer, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1948, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Cramer.R.1948.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

These “non-traditional students” tied the UW Colleges and Extension to the concept of the Wisconsin Idea, which calls upon the state of Wisconsin to reach individuals in all corners of the state. Through their work in rural communities stretching throughout Wisconsin, the mission and very structure of the UW Colleges, whose buildings and foundations are owned by the communities in which they are situated, reflects the idea that education should influence people’s everyday lives and communities. The UW Extension, with agricultural cooperative extension officers in counties throughout the state, and flexible education/continuing education options, further reflected this concept. As former Director of Distance Education Scott Bouffleur noted, unlike four-year universities, “here in Wausau, the county owns all of the buildings that are on this campus. So there’s a different dynamic than a comprehensive like, so Stevens Point, just thirty miles down the road, you know, everything that’s on the Stevens Point campuses is owned by the state. So they may not have as close of a relationship with the county government.”³

This mission driven belief system is essential to understanding why many employees at the former Colleges continued to work there, despite the difficulties of regionalization and later, restructuring. During the regionalization of the UW Colleges, many positions were eliminated, and administrators at the UW Colleges often functioned in multiple roles as a result. As Dan Anhalt described in his assessment of regionalization, “each of us, each region, well, the colleges, usually the colleges went from around fifty-four people who were responsible for running various campuses, because there were a number of assistant deans and associate deans, and then the dean at each campus. After regionalization, there were seventeen of us statewide instead of fifty-four.” Describing morale during this period of time and its impact in relation to restructuring, UW Colleges Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Melissa Stutz noted that “morale was low. Enrollment was low. [...] I think one thing that’s important to remember about the colleges people, staff and students, is they were, the wounds from regionalization were not healed when restructure was announced. I mean, that was just like ripping it right back open and pouring salt—really bad sea salt—right into it. And so some of the people that are, they’ve had kind of double whammy in pain and suffering is, I think, how they’ll see it.”⁴

The move from individual positions at the campus level, to fewer regional positions at a central level, also created difficulties within the culture of the UW Colleges. In describing her movement into a regional position as Director of Continuing Education for the Southwest Region, Jessica Laeseke described the impact of regionalization as difficult – “you were going and applying against job with people that you grew to work with, that you grew to like. That you grew to become friends with. So after that, obviously, there was tensions as well. And then you would, you know, going to the campus where another person was in the position that obviously was well-liked by their colleagues. Whether they applied for the position or not, you weren’t that person.”⁵ These tensions then led to difficulties adjusting to working with local campuses at a regional level.

³ Scott Bouffleur, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1953, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Bouffleur.S.1953.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴ Melissa Stutz, interviewed by Isaac Lee, 2019, OH #1874, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Stutz.M.1874.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁵ Jessica Laeseke, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1962, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Laeseke.J.1962.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

In the aforementioned quote, Jessica Laeseke describes the tension of being an outsider, and within this shift there were also growing pains due to the differences in local identities between campuses. As UW Marinette Campus Administrator Cynthia Bailey described it, “each campus had different relations within their community. Each campus had a different faculty/staff dynamic. So it was interesting when we were given our roles to oversee two different campuses that sometimes had very different cultures and very different ways of doing things.”⁶ As a result, those who came into regional positions had to learn about the operations and culture of different campuses, while also dealing with the difficulties of job loss and the tension the regionalization process created.

Regionalization, Collaboration, and Efficiency

While regionalization created some difficulties, interviewees that worked at the UW Colleges also noted the Colleges’ uniquely efficient and collaborative nature in the context of regionalization. Interviewees described a culture in which administrators had to be experts in several different roles due to its regional structure. Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Melissa Stutz noted that unlike the four-year comprehensive universities, “at colleges, when we went through regionalization, I mean, over a hundred people lost their jobs. There is not one person in this institution that has one job. Not one. Everybody wears multiple, multiple, multiple hats.”⁷ Continuing Education Regional Director Jessica Laeseke noted this as well, stating that “UW Colleges, we had always been super-efficient in everything we did. I mean, you took a person like me in the continuing education office. And what I did, there were four or five people that did that same thing at the comprehensive level. Because we had to be one person doing that. [...] I had to know enough about all those five areas to be able to represent them in the UW Colleges. Versus kind of everybody being more siloed, I would say, at the comprehensive campuses.”⁸

Several also noted that the Colleges were collaborative in a way that many of the four-year universities in Wisconsin were not. While the four year universities in Wisconsin compete at a statewide recruiting level, the UW Colleges were often not in competition with each other, as they recruited from local communities. Jessica Laeseke noted that “some things that I had to say is that in the Colleges, the difference was, we were very collaborative. Because yes, we were each of those thirteen individual campuses, but we were collectively part of UW Colleges. So we had to pay money into the central office and things like that. But we were kind of helping to support each other as well.”⁹ This was unlike the four-year universities, which “do not want to share information of any kind, usually. I mean, you have some people who do. But everything is very territorial with the comprehensive campuses, because you’re competing against somebody else. Platteville is competing against Whitewater. Even though we’re part of the UW System, they’re competing for the same students.”¹⁰

The impact of the regionalization of the UW Colleges in creating a more collaborative, “leaner” model often meant that administrators at the UW Colleges had to use funding creatively. Melissa Stutz stated that while some portions of the regional model didn’t work well,

⁶ Cynthia Bailey, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 1965, OH #1965, digital audio file, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁷ Melissa Stutz, interviewed by Isaac Lee, 2019, OH #1874.

⁸ Jessica Laeseke, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1962.

⁹ Jessica Laeseke, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1962.

¹⁰ Jessica Laeseke, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1962.

in other ways “with regards to being resource-conscious and looking at things a little bit differently, I think there were parts of it that absolutely were working.”¹¹ Melissa Stutz, Cynthia Bailey, and others talked about this in terms of creating centralized “one stop shops” for information. Bailey noted that “more and more campuses are going to one-stop shops where you come in and all of your questions are answered, and you can get generally started on anything. And I think that’s what we were really designing at each of our locations was that.”¹²

The Need for and Process of Restructuring

Moving from regionalization into the restructuring process, I cannot help but feel sympathetic to all of my interviewees, and particularly those who worked at the UW Colleges. All of my interviewees ended up taking on extra work due to the restructuring process, or lost their job through the restructuring process. Those who worked at the UW Colleges prior to regionalization also saw structural turnover and the loss of many jobs due to both regionalization and restructuring. All of my interviewees were part of a difficult process in which emotions ran high, and difficult decisions had to be made.

The recency of the restructuring project has meant that the long term impact has yet to be assessed. For those of my interviewees that did comment on the need for the restructuring as it occurred, the responses varied vastly depending on that individual’s role within the UW System, and their level of access to information. For some at the UW System and in centralized roles at the UW Colleges, the need for something to be done was eminently apparent due to the declining enrollment numbers at the UW Colleges, and the deep funding cuts to the UW System. Rather than being a question of the need for change, these interviewees questioned the model through which that change occurred, and how that model could be effectively used to the benefit of the UW System. For these interviewees, the writing was written on the wall before restructuring had even occurred, and the question of restructuring was how it could be used to the advantage of the new branch campuses and their affiliated four-year institution.

For other interviewees at the UW Colleges, the restructuring, and particularly its timeline in the context of the UW Colleges, was difficult to understand. Interviewees at the UW Colleges described long term goals and initiatives that had been put in place after the regionalization of the UW Colleges, with the focus of these goals structured around a regional model. As a result, the announcement of the restructuring process did not make sense in the context of this regionalization and the goals these interviewees had been working towards. Furthermore, the dismantling of the central UW Colleges operations, through which the UW Colleges were able to more efficiently allocate funding and staff, made little sense to many of my interviewees.

Another theme is the lack of information more generally about how the process was going to occur, and the feasibility of the restructuring process. Several interviewees pointed out the lack of information surrounding the viability of restructuring as branch campuses, noting that there seemed to be no long term plan for growing enrollment or any data backing the model. Interviewees also noted that there seemed to be no plan in general – the short two year timeline for the project appeared arbitrary, and the timelines for various goals throughout the project appeared very arbitrary as well. Others pointed to the lack of input of officials at the Colleges in creating this model, and their lack of input in the resulting process. Describing the initial phase of the project generally, Jessica Laeseke stated that “It was more of just information being given to us. Like this is kind of what’s happening. This is the new plan. That’s kind of what it was.

¹¹ Melissa Stutz, interviewed by Isaac Lee, 2019, OH #1874.

¹² Cynthia Bailey, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 1965, OH #1965.

There was so much uncertainty, I would say, for the first couple of months. There wasn't a lot of details."¹³

Many of those who ended up sitting on or chairing the functional teams of the Steering Committee, which coordinated oversight of the restructuring process, were called upon to participate in the project in the short time between the project's announcement in October 2017, and the beginning of planning in November 2017. In the resulting restructuring process, several facets took longer than allocated for in the timeline due to their dependency on other factors. For instance, Director of Financial Aid at UW Milwaukee Tim Opgenorth described the dependency of financial aid on moving student information systems, noting that "you know, you have all the computer data in Colleges' system. You had to get all that information transferred over to, you know, they had their software system. [...] Because in the end, if the students weren't in our computer system, we couldn't do anything."¹⁴

Now that these processes have been transitioned and the restructuring project is complete, the question of the fate of the now branch campuses is still at stake. As UW Green Bay Associate Provost of Academic Affairs Clifton Ganyard said, "it's still costing us more money to keep these campuses open than we're bringing in by delivering the services. So there's a budgetary shortfall with these campuses that's taking some money. So we're working on trying to solve that. We don't want to close any of these campuses, obviously. But we do need to figure out how we can pay for it. And either enrollment needs to turn around so that we overcome that shortfall, or we just need to decide what level of expense are we willing to pay to keep the campuses open."¹⁵ Having inherited the financial debt and small budget of the former UW Colleges, UW comprehensive universities now also have to tackle long term issues such as enrollment and declining demographics, while also building relationships with the staff and community members affiliated with the branch campuses.

The ability to improve upon and create new services for branch campus has also been noted by some interviewees as a positive change. As Rob Cramer noted, universities have dealt with the branch campus system differently depending on which campuses they are affiliated with, and these relationships will continue to change as the branch campuses develop further. He noted that things have already changed at some branch campuses, "for example, you can come and use our recreational facilities now, if you want to. Whitewater is running a shuttle bus back and forth. And the number of people who are attending class at UW Whitewater-Rock [County] live in the residence halls at UW Whitewater. So again, it's going to be a lot more, I think, variation, what's going on in these different locations."¹⁶ As a result of these services, new relationships can be built between the four-year institutions and their branch campuses.

Building up public trust and forging relationships is no small task, as many interviewees have noted. In relation to this, interviewees within this project have remarked upon the distrust of centralized higher education coming from Madison and the state, and the importance of building trust not simply at the local level, but throughout the UW System. In one example related to the movement of the Cooperative Extension from the UW Colleges and Extension to UW System,

¹³ Jessica Laeseke, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1962.

¹⁴ Timothy Opgenorth, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1997, digital audio file, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁵ Clifton Ganyard, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1950, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Ganyard.C.1950.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁶ Robert Cramer, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2020, OH #1948.

Vice President of the Extended Campus Aaron Brower noted that “Extension literally funds the mental health services in Buffalo County. Buffalo County’s in the mid and west part of the state. Their fear was, if Madison’s taking this over, is Madison just going to sweep up all the resources and forget about us as a county and our needs? So they were pretty worried. And so Madison did a lot of work to travel around all the counties, spend a lot of time reassuring people it’s a new administrative home but the services are going to remain.”¹⁷ In his interview, Vice Provost for the Division of Extension and Public Media Casey Nagy expanded on the opportunity to change those narratives with the movement of Extension and Public Media to the UW System, stating that “as you get further out from Madison, you know, people have a more skeptical view of what Madison offers in the way of resources or things of that nature. And one of the benefits of working more closely with Extension and Public Media now is we have a real opportunity to begin changing that narrative by partnering with entities they’re more familiar with and with whom they have good associations.”¹⁸

Ultimately, examining the restructuring process, how it was perceived by different administrators within the UW System, and the criticisms of how the process played out are very important to how it may be perceived in the future. The restructuring process impacted thousands of students throughout the state of Wisconsin. It involved what schools students went to, how the former Colleges will be perceived in the future, the continued programming and mission of the former Colleges, and the local communities in which the former Colleges are situated. It involves the extensive cooperation and involvement of the four-year universities, and the creation of a new student base that includes branch campuses. It involves relationships with flexible education opportunities, public media, and the Cooperative Extensions. This project also involved much larger questions about the future of higher education, and how local community colleges can be sustained in the face of larger demographic shifts.

As the UW System Restructuring Project comes to a close, I am incredibly proud of my interviewees and their willingness to participate. I hope that people looking at this project in the future can glean a better understanding of the massive scope of this project, and the intense amount of time and effort on the part of all involved that it took to achieve. I hope that listeners will also be able to better understand the former UW Colleges and Extension as it existed prior to restructuring, and how the former UW College campuses have adapted as branch campuses. The UW System is a complex organism with many moving parts, and this project has interviewed dedicated individuals with many years of experience in their fields of expertise. With their participation, I hope that in the coming years people will be able to understand how higher education functions, and the deep impacts of these functions as they pertained to the restructuring of the UW Colleges and Extension. I know that I have learned so much, and grown to appreciate those in public education so much more, all thanks to this project.

¹⁷ Aaron Brower, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2019, OH #1937, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Brower.A.1937.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁸ Casey Nagy, interviewed by Lena Evers-Hillstrom, 2019, OH #1927, <https://ohms.library.wisc.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=Nagy.C.1927.xml>, University Archives and Records Management Services, Madison, Wisconsin.

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