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COLUMN: UWSP meets students' needs despite economy

*By Mark Nook
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The life of a university brings a steady parade of opportunities, often influenced by a similarly constant array of challenges.

During this trying economic downturn, we must sharpen our focus on the future of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. We cannot lay low and wait for the storm to pass. We must plan for our future and wisely invest our resources, from our facilities and dollars to the incredible talents of our faculty and staff.

To make these investments wisely now and into the future, we need to consider how we can best position our university to be able to meet the educational and developmental needs of our students, the region and the state.

We will continue to develop better ways to ensure our students receive the excellent liberal arts education they require to be successful in their personal and professional lives. We are revising our general education program, the centerpiece for providing our students with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful as engaged professionals and responsible citizens within our global society.

We also are revising the processes we use to assure continued improvement in the quality of all our academic programs. This revision comes from our commitment to our students and the need to provide them with the highest quality of education possible, both inside and outside the classroom.

As a university, we understand the innovation and collaboration needed to deliver the education our region and state most need. One example of this is the continued development of a future baccalaureate nursing degree program for central Wisconsin, which we have been working on with the UW System administration for the past two years.

We believe our students are the future leaders of our communities and that the abilities we help them develop will unlock a future in which our state, region and nation can better weather, and even avoid, the kind of economic storm upon us today. As a university dedicated to transforming lives, we also believe the hardships we face now should have the least possible impact on our mission to educate Wisconsin's next generation.

Under Gov. Jim Doyle's emergency budget measures, UWSP faculty and staff are required to take the unpaid furloughs mandated for all state employees. The furlough of faculty and staff is equivalent to a loss of 28 people from our work force each of the next two years.

Our students' tuition and fees provide nearly 75 percent of our budget, and the state likely will ask our students and their families to shoulder even higher tuition this coming year. We know that nearly all of our students come from families and communities directly affected by Wisconsin's climbing unemployment rate. Consequently, we are committed to mitigating the impact of the furlough on our students. Faculty and academic staff will not be furloughed during class days or on days critical to supporting our students' education.

Our economy eventually will turn around, and UWSP will emerge as an institution strategically prepared to meet the needs of our students and the region as a top university in the Midwest.

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