

# Lawmakers push interstate campuses

**CLUSTER, From 1A**

with Rep. Scott Jensen (R-Town of Brookfield) to seek funding in the new UW System budget to study the interstate alliance. The same two lawmakers have been the main legislative advocates of an expected campus merger proposal, seeking to combine two-year campuses in Waukesha and Rice Lake with UW-Milwaukee and UW-Stout, respectively.

But like the mergers, the interstate concept is running into early opposition.

UW-Superior administrators compare the Minnesota endeavor to a merger, and contend that it would usurp control from Wisconsin taxpayers, reduce student access to higher education and create an unworkable partnership.

"This is simply a bad idea," Vice Chancellor David Prior said in a prepared statement.

A student lobbying group known as United Council for UW Students, which already is leading a campaign to derail the mergers, has reservations about the Minnesota experiment, too.

## Details on plan

Renee Stieve, the group's legislative director, said students are suspicious of the reform ideas emanating from Madison because, she said, lawmakers have not outlined their plans in detail.

"It's just very odd," Stieve said of the interstate alliance. "Why now? And where is this coming from?"

Facing a \$1.6 billion budget deficit, state officials in recent months have discussed a variety of strategies for reconfiguring Wisconsin's higher education system, which includes 13 four-year universities, 13 two-year campuses and 16 technical colleges.

After a state administrative panel in December called for awarding more bachelor's degrees throughout Wisconsin, Kreibich and Jensen focused on merging two-year campuses into neighboring four-year universities.

UW System administrators also have floated a cost-saving idea to combine the administration of two-year campuses with that of the UW Extension Service.

An interstate cluster with Minnesota would take higher education reform efforts to a new level, reaching outside Wisconsin for the first time. The proposed arrangement is modeled after Tri-College University, a Fargo, N.D.-based consortium that was forged more than 30 years ago by North Dakota State University, Minneso-

ta State University-Moorhead, and the private Concordia College in Moorhead.

Although the three institutions remain autonomous, their administrators cooperate on a number of levels, including recruiting students and operating a course exchange that allows students to attend more than one college simultaneously.

Out of about 20,000 students enrolled in the three institutions, more than 1,200 take advantage of the interstate consortium.

## Stretching dwindling dollars

Minnesota State-Moorhead President Roland Barden said the arrangement helped his campus weather a financial crisis 10 years ago, because budget

cuts could be targeted at services that students would find still available at the partner schools.

"It's been a great model," he said. "If two or three institutions want to make it work, it works."

Larry Isaak, president of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact, a group that promotes interstate cooperation, believes such alliances will become more popular

as states look for ways to stretch their dwindling dollars.

## Improved service

The biggest payoff comes in improved service for students, Isaak said, although he added that Tri-College University has achieved financial savings for its partners, too.

"It's been a real success story," he said.

Lawmakers hoping to duplicate the achievement in Wisconsin already are thinking of how the model could be used elsewhere in the state, including the borders with Illinois and Michigan.

"Higher education is going to be more regional," Kreibich said. "I think we can reach out to our neighbors."

One potential obstacle in Wisconsin is the distance to neighboring universities.

Unlike the Superior and Duluth campuses, which are less than 10 miles apart, prospective campus partners in Illinois or Michigan could be harder to reach.

Jensen said although such alliances would be difficult to build, he hopes that the initial experiment will demonstrate what is possible from rethinking old assumptions.

"We need to look anew at the university system," he said. "Piece by piece, we are asking the system to think anew."



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**Rep. Scott Jensen (R-Town of Brookfield)**



**"We've got to look beyond our borders. Cluster campuses are going to be a wave of the future."**

**Rep. Rob Kreibich (R-Eau Claire)**

For more information about Tri-College University, go to [www.tri-college.org](http://www.tri-college.org).