

## Let's have constructive, informed dialogue about UW-Stevens Point

Bernie Patterson, for [The Capital Times](#) – June 14, 2018

When UW-Stevens Point leaders announced a proposal March 5 to address fiscal challenges, the purpose was to invite dialogue to shape a plan for a sustainable future for our institution.

Dialogue has certainly ensued. Many productive conversations across campus are now exploring promising possibilities. Off campus, however, much of it has been long on criticism and short on constructive solutions. Sadly, across the state and nation, misconceptions abound about UW-Stevens Point. Few who write — some from more than 1,000 miles away — have taken time to contact us for details about what is actually happening here, or why, yet they presume to know what is best for our campus.



Allow me to correct some of the misconceptions:

**FICTION:** UW-Stevens Point has eliminated the humanities/liberal arts.

**FACT:** UW-Stevens Point remains committed to ensuring every graduate is thoroughly grounded in the liberal arts, as well as prepared for a successful career path. In fact, we have asked a faculty committee to consider how these broad learning experiences can be enhanced through our General Education requirements. Unlike at a tech school, all UW-Stevens Point students complete broad General Ed courses in the liberal arts and sciences, which comprise about one-third of coursework at the university.

Even if some programs are discontinued as proposed, 80 percent of courses in the humanities and social sciences will continue. This is in keeping with our strategic plan and select mission: “to provide programs that help communities become more vibrant, healthy, prosperous and sustainable. We accomplish this by providing a broad foundation in the fine arts, humanities, natural sciences and social sciences for associate and baccalaureate degrees.”

**FICTION:** UW-Stevens Point will become a tech school.

**FACT:** Wisconsin is fortunate to have an excellent technical college system, and we each have distinct missions and meet important but different needs. Tech programs do a very good job teaching specific skills for a specific job. UW-Stevens Point programs provide a broad, liberal arts education as well as deep knowledge in a professional field. Bachelor's degrees in such majors as biochemistry, business administration, chemical engineering, education, finance, geographic information science and music are among the more than 100 majors and emphases offered at UW-Stevens Point.

**FICTION:** This is a manufactured financial crisis.

**FACT:** UW-Stevens Point has a \$4.5 million structural deficit, and it is growing. Our expenses exceed revenues. The issues we are struggling with today were amplified in the last biennial budget, when our

state support was cut by 25 percent and tuition was frozen for another two years, for a total six-year freeze. Also, a decline in enrollment of 1,500 since fall 2013 translates to an annual loss of about \$9 million in tuition. By the end of this fiscal year, our reserves will be nearly depleted with little remaining in accounts across campus. The need to address our deficit is urgent.

FICTION: This is an attempt to get rid of tenured faculty.

FACT: This is an attempt to address significant budget problems. We have discussed the need to align spending with declining revenues for years. The March proposal outlines a path to stabilize enrollment and address fiscal challenges. It suggests discontinuing 13 majors. If programs are eliminated, it is possible layoff of tenured faculty members may result. Until all options are explored and a formal proposal is finalized, reviewed and approved, it is too soon to know how tenured faculty may be affected.

FICTION: Decisions have already been made — it's a manifesto, one essayist opined.

FACT: The proposal was a starting point for the formal decision-making that lies ahead. The purpose of sharing recommendations in March and announcing no formal review would begin before August was to invite discussion and input over several months. Already, one committee of our shared governance group has reviewed the proposal and provided a report, which a second committee of faculty, staff and students has taken up. A Student Government Association task force has also responded to the proposal. We welcome these efforts and look forward to continued discussion. Conversations are also underway across departments about curriculum changes, interdisciplinary offerings and new ways to meet our fiscal challenges.

FICTION: Faculty were not involved/informed.

FACT: Extensive conversations have occurred on campus over the past three years, including no less than 24 budget messages from me in 2015. Discussions began then about how to strategically plan for a future with less revenue. Faculty and staff input was invited in surveys and meetings at every level of the organization. No one wants to suggest cuts to their own program or their colleagues' programs, so we are not surprised that after 2.5 years of conversations, we had not reached solutions to balancing the budget. As a result, the proposal put forth March 5 was intended to jumpstart the conversation that languished without meaningful conclusion.

FICTION: Academics should be the last place to make cuts. Start with senior administration.

FACT: UW-Stevens Point has tried nearly every strategy except cutting academic programs to address fiscal challenges. We absorbed \$6.5 million of cuts — 25 percent of our state support — in the last biennial budget without a single faculty or academic staff layoff. We combined roles in administration and academic support, implemented cost savings and reduced spending on student activities, supplies, equipment, technology and facilities. Some administrators are doing jobs once done by two or more people.

Our administrative costs are about half of the average cost nationwide. Data from approximately 100 comparable four-year public universities in the United States indicate average “Institutional Support (administration) as a Percentage of Total Expenses” was 12.9 percent. UW-Stevens Point’s institution support rate was 6.86 percent.

FICTION: The job market is weak for programs proposed at UW-Stevens Point.

FACT: A [UW-River Falls political science professor](#) who compared aquaculture/aquaponics — which combines biology, chemistry, math, sustainable food systems and marketing — to fishing and hunting jobs fails to understand this industry and the scientific basis of the discipline. His assessment of job demand based on state statistics ignores our regional demand for bachelor’s degrees in computer information systems and the national demand for wildland fire science, which has nothing to do with structural firefighting in cities and towns. Our chemical engineering and future environmental engineering programs are aimed at specific, growing demand in those fields, as assessed by faculty with expertise in these areas.

FICTION: Cutting the proposed majors will limit choices of incoming and current students.

FACT: If we eliminate one or more major, there will be fewer choices. Even if all 13 majors were discontinued, students would still have 107 majors and emphases within those majors from which to choose. Additional majors are being explored in high-demand career paths that could provide more opportunity in the future.

FICTION: You can’t recruit faculty without offering a major.

FACT: Our colleagues at UW Colleges across Wisconsin affirm what we already knew: Exceptional faculty at our two-year campuses provide excellent educational experience for their students. Their dedication to the enterprise of teaching and learning is unsurpassed, all accomplished without offering specific majors.

In conclusion, we have excellent faculty and staff skilled at critical thinking and dedicated to their profession. I look forward to continued constructive dialogue with them, as well as students and other stakeholders. Already, several departments have suggested innovative approaches to solving budget and curricular challenges. Constructive ideas to bolster our enrollment and enhance our revenue, coupled with smart reductions in spending, will point us forward.

*Bernie Patterson is the chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.*

[https://host.madison.com/ct/opinion/column/bernie-patterson-let-s-have-constructive-informed-dialogue-about-uw/article\\_5e27f6d9-3d36-57ee-9140-b6451c3c4868.html](https://host.madison.com/ct/opinion/column/bernie-patterson-let-s-have-constructive-informed-dialogue-about-uw/article_5e27f6d9-3d36-57ee-9140-b6451c3c4868.html)