Dear colleagues and students:

As you may have seen or heard in recent news accounts, Governor Scott Walker has just released details of his budget proposal for the UW System for the coming 2015-2017 biennium. Although the Governor's proposal won't be fully disclosed until next week, and must then make its way through the legislative process before becoming finalized into Wisconsin's 2015-2017 state budget, the following provisions in Governor Walker's proposal will have a significant impact on UW-La Crosse:

1) cutting $300 million in UW System funding over the next two years (UW-L's cut is $12 M)
2) continuing the current tuition freeze for another two years (no new revenue for UW-L)
3) granting permanent "public authority" status to the UW System sometime during 2015-2017

Although attaining public authority status has welcome new autonomy for the UW System and our campus, the potential new flexibilities—in the processes used for construction, procurement and tuition-setting—will be vastly outweighed by the serious financial challenges created by a substantial reduction in our state funding coupled with our inability to offset some of that cut through a modest tuition increase.

People who are not familiar with how our university, a non-profit enterprise, actually works often say we need to "be more efficient" and "trim the fat" from our operation. However, because the UW System has experienced major reductions in state funding in every biennial budget over the past 14 years, our institution is about as lean as it can be. Moreover, because our employees have had minimal pay increases over the past five years and have been required to spend more for their health insurance and retirement plans, it can't be said that our people are paid too generously for the high quality instruction and services they provide to students. That's why we're consistently ranked by organizations like Kiplinger's Personal Finance and U.S. News as one of the top values in higher education in the country. So it will be quite challenging for us to find ways to absorb $12 million in cuts without compromising the quality of our university.

Earlier today my leadership team colleagues and I met to begin thinking about a plan to make the cuts the state appears likely to impose upon us. In order to broaden our conversation we'll soon be engaging our Joint Planning and Budget Committee, and we'll hold open forums later this semester so that all of you can contribute to the dialogue and learn the latest information. As in past years, we're committed to conducting the coming budget cutting process in a fully transparent and collaborative fashion.

We're also committed to continuing UW-L's longstanding tradition of putting students first. So as we make budget reductions we'll do so in a way that ensures we continue offering the classes our students need to complete their programs. Likewise, we'll maintain the wide array of student services and activities that make our campus a true "24/7" learning environment.
And because we know it is our faculty and staff, rather than just our buildings and equipment, that make this such an outstanding university, we'll strive to avoid laying off any current employees. To do so we'll need to carefully review all vacant positions and determine how we might be able to carry on without many of them in the future. This likely will require some reorganization and reallocation of responsibilities, and we'll be grateful for the collaboration and patience of those in the areas that will be most directly impacted.

I can't tell you that making our coming budget reductions will be easy. But I hope you share my confidence that by working together we can meet the challenges that lie ahead. You may not know this, but it took over 12 years of planning and lobbying just to secure the original $10,000 state appropriation that led to the establishment of a "normal school" in what we now call Graff Main Hall. And since that teacher training institute began offering classes in August of 1909 it has taken an incredible amount of determination and creativity to create the world-class university we're so proud of today. So as I look out on our campus from my office in Main Hall I know we can bring our own determination and creativity to our coming challenges. Thanks so much for your assistance and patience as we continue moving UW-L forward!

Sincerely,

Joe Gow, Chancellor

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse