Featured guest column: Sowing rice, planting trees, or educating people?

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By UW-River Falls Chancellor Dean Van Galen

From time to time, all of us experience a series of events that make us think more deeply about ourselves and the world in which we live.

I want to share such a series of events with you.

Event #1: On Jan. 27, Wisconsin’s Governor released his proposal for the UW System 2015-2017 budget, including a $150 million base budget reduction to the UW System and a re-envisioning of the UW System as a “public authority.”

I look forward to learning more about the governor’s innovative idea regarding the public authority, which has the long-term potential to create a more effective and agile system of public higher education in Wisconsin.

Regarding the budget, the UW-River Falls campus would experience an estimated $4.2 million budget cut if the budget proposal was adopted -- a 16% reduction in public state support.

UWRF now faces a jolting, recurring budget cut, a continued tuition freeze, and depleted reserves (since we were compelled to spend down our “rainy day funds” which, for the most part, were already committed).
This latest budget cut, I knew, would be devastating, causing us to lay off or not renew significant numbers of the people who educate and support our students. There is always rhetoric around budget issues, but I assure you that this is very real.

**Event #2:** I read recent comments made by public officials that imply university faculty do not work hard enough.

I thought back to my years as a chemistry professor, teaching “only 12 hours a week” but working 55–60 hours a week on teaching, preparing lectures and labs, grading, advising individual students and the chemistry club, writing student letters of recommendation for graduate school and summer jobs, working on and publishing research projects with students, serving on committees, judging high school science fairs, presenting chemistry magic shows at pre-schools, reading journals to stay current in my field, etc.

I know that my experience represents that of many UW–River Falls faculty. I hear and understand their frustration as they continue to do excellent work, because they care about students, while feeling little public support.

Students and families want the very best faculty in the classroom. UWRF competes to hire the best faculty who, after about eight years of college (undergraduate and graduate programs) in which they excelled and often incurred debt, are interviewed and selected in a national search from among dozens of qualified applicants.

If hired, these educators come to UW–River Falls for what I know is an important and demanding job. It is critical that faculty have time to engage in the range of activities that ultimately support effective education as well as the broader goals of the state.

**Event #3:** This week, I had the opportunity to speak to about 400 middle and high school students and parents at Waupun High School. I was born and raised in Waupun, a wonderful rural community about an hour northeast of Madison.
by car.

Many of the students I spoke to aspire to be the first in their families to go to college. I expressed my hope that they will go on to become the educators and artists, the business and community leaders, and the scientists and researchers of their generation.

I told them that education is the key to their future, and the future of Wisconsin. For the financially minded, I also pointed out that college graduates on average earn $1 million more over their lifetimes than high school graduates.

Being invited back to Waupun, I was overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude for my parents, teachers, professors, and the citizens of Wisconsin who supported my education in Waupun and later at UW-Whitewater.

I recalled that when I returned to Wisconsin six years ago to serve as chancellor of UW-River Falls, I was excited to come back to a place where education was highly valued.

As the son of two factory workers who never graduated from high school, I believe that it is critical that students from Waupun (and elsewhere) be provided opportunities to pursue higher education in Wisconsin that is not only affordable, but is of the exceptionally high quality that has been a hallmark of this state for decades.

**Educating People:** As a Wisconsinite and an educator in a state that has historically prioritized education, these and similar events cause me great concern. I believe there is nothing more important than education in shaping the long-term quality of life and economic opportunities for the people of this great state.

I think it is time for Wisconsin to re-establish education as a core value, and to prioritize public higher education, even in difficult times. We would be wise to
heed the words of this Chinese proverb:

If you are planning for a year, sow rice;

If you are planning for a decade, plant trees;

If you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.

Unless we invest in “educating people,” the rice will only get more scarce.

Editor’s note: Dean Van Galen is the 18th chancellor at UW-River Falls. Van Galen’s tenure here is highlighted by a series of firsts for UWRF, including the creation of an off-campus adult learning center and the launch of a comprehensive fundraising campaign.