Governor Walker’s budget repair proposal, which was publicly released last Friday (Feb. 11, 2011), would increase the contributions Wisconsin Retirement System members pay toward their pensions by an estimated 5.6% of their salary (up from the current 0.2%), and increase the amount state employees pay toward health insurance premiums to at least 12.6% of the total premium cost (up from the current typical cost in Milwaukee County of about 5%). Thus, for a typical UW-Milwaukee faculty member, with a salary of $60,000 and family health care coverage, this will amount to an increased annual pension contribution of $3360, along with increased annual health care premium costs of $1620, for an annual total of $4980. This amounts to an 8.3% reduction in pay.

These are substantial reductions, and not minor contributions as some have called them. Nevertheless, while none of us likes a cut in pay, UW-Milwaukee faculty are even more concerned about the irreparable damage this proposal would do to our University, and its capacity to contribute to Wisconsin’s long-term future. As demonstrated in the Competitive University Workforce Commission Final Report (released in June 2010), UW-Milwaukee faculty salaries (page 14) are from 13 to almost 29% below those at comparable universities across the country—the lowest salaries relative to peers (at all faculty ranks) of any university in the UW-System:


University faculty positions must be competitive within national and international markets. The effects of the proposed changes in total compensation will be immediate and long-term. Many of our most experienced faculty will retire; our “best and brightest” young faculty will leave; and those faculty who remain will be demoralized. At the very time when the State and Southeastern Wisconsin should see UW-Milwaukee as a critical partner paving the way to a brighter future for the State through exceptional and highly economical education of college graduates, this proposal unfortunately paints UWM faculty and staff as working against the interests of the State and its citizens. And the changes that are being proposed are not just emergency measures. By holding all future wage increases to “not exceed a cap based on the consumer price index (CPI)”, there would be no mechanism to ever regain what the State is about to lose.

Besides the primary issues mentioned above, there are two other aspects of the Governor’s proposal that are particularly disturbing to the UW-Milwaukee faculty. First, the whole process is being rushed at a pace designed to limit debate. Surely, such a far-reaching and potentially damaging proposal should be afforded at least a few weeks of discussion and scrutiny within the Legislature before passage. Second, there are a great many items associated with this proposal that have little apparent connection to any direct economic impact for the State. These items do not belong in legislation being pushed as an emergency financial package, and should be removed and justified separately.