

University of Wisconsin System

Two-year campuses absorbed into regional four-year universities



STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Vertical consolidation with 13 two-year colleges initially becoming branch campuses of seven four-year receiving institutions.

WHY THE SYSTEM TRANSFORMED

The University of Wisconsin System (UW System) faced a growing mismatch between its two-year college footprint and student demand. From 2010 to 2017, full-time-equivalent enrollment across the UW Colleges fell by 32 percent, with declines of roughly 50 percent at several campuses.¹ The system was also managing repeated reductions in state support and limits on tuition growth.

Maintaining a separate statewide administration for 13 small campuses became increasingly difficult. System leaders reasoned that integrating the campuses with regional universities could preserve local access, reduce administrative duplication, expand academic offerings, and create more seamless pathways to bachelor's degrees. Ultimately, however, the restructuring could not overcome persistent enrollment challenges at many of the new branch campuses.

WHAT CHANGED

The Board of Regents approved the system restructuring in November 2017, and the Higher Learning Commission authorized the changes effective July 1, 2018.² The 13 two-year colleges ceased operating as a separately administered two-year institution and became branch campuses of seven comprehensive or research universities. Their physical locations and associate-degree access mission were initially retained, while accreditation, budgeting, leadership, student services, and academic oversight shifted to the receiving universities. UW-Extension was also dismantled, with its major units transferred to either UW-Madison or the system administration.

The new model was intentionally regional rather than statewide. Each receiving university could determine how to integrate its branch campuses, while systemwide transfer guarantees and program alignment were intended to connect associate-degree students to a broader range of bachelor's degree programs. The Wisconsin Technical College System, which also offers associate degrees, was not impacted by this restructuring.

RESULTS AND LESSONS

The UW System completed the governance and accreditation changes quickly and made progress in aligning programs and improving transfer pathways. The restructuring maintained and expanded affordable access by increasing course and bachelor's degree offerings at branch campuses while reducing barriers to credit transfer. It also standardized and regionalized administrative services, leveraged systemwide resources and talent, and better aligned educational pathways with Wisconsin's workforce needs.³

However, the financial benefits were modest because operating multiple geographically dispersed facilities continued to require substantial staffing and support. Branch-campus enrollment fell another 25 percent in fall 2019, and the underlying demographic pressures persisted.⁴

Beginning in 2022, six branch campuses affiliated with three universities closed amid continued enrollment declines and financial challenges.⁵ A seventh location, UW-Green Bay's Marinette campus, transitioned to online-only instruction. By 2026, only seven of the original 13 branch campuses remained operational.

The central lesson is that vertical consolidation can simplify academic pathways and eliminate a layer of administration, but it cannot independently generate student demand or make every location financially sustainable. Receiving universities need clear incentives, accountability, and sufficient capacity to protect the two-year access mission. Systems also need campus-level viability measures and transparent contingency plans from the outset. Preserving every location may help build political support at launch, but it should not be viewed as evidence that restructuring has resolved the underlying challenges.

[1] University of Wisconsin System (2022). *UW System - Colleges and extension restructuring at-a-glance*
<https://www.wisconsin.edu/about-new/wpcontent/uploads/sites/366/2026/01/RestructuringAtAGlance.pdf>

[2] University of Wisconsin System. (2017, November 9). Board of Regents approves restructure of UW Colleges and UW-Extension.
<https://www.wisconsin.edu/news/archive/board-of-regents-approves-restructure-of-uw-colleges-and-uw-extension/>

[3] University of Wisconsin System (2022).

[4] University of Wisconsin System (n.d.). *UW System - Fall Semester Enrollment Comparison with Prior Year (preliminary)*.
<https://www.wisconsin.edu/news/download/UW-Preliminary-Enrollment-Totals-2019.pdf>

[5] Martin, S. (2025, September 18). What's happening with UW System's shuttered branch campuses? *Wisconsin State Journal*.
<https://news.uwgb.edu/phlash/mediacoverage/09/18/whats-happening-with-uw-systems-branch-campuses-wisconsin-state-journal/>