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In this unprecedented time in Wisconsin and U.S. history, regents need to get it right when hiring a new UW System President

When the regents began their search for a new UW System President last year, it was long before the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests inspired by the death of George Floyd. In November, the PROFS Steering Committee wrote to Regent President Drew Petersen to express disappointment that the search committee included no faculty or staff. “Not only does this decision contravene decades of well-established precedent,” the steering committee wrote. “It will be taken by UW System’s 23,600 faculty and staff as a deliberate insult – correctly, in our opinion.” PROFS and others, including Governor Evers, opposed the way the presidential search committee was set up from the start. We now believe it is even more important that the regents get the hiring right. If there really was only one qualified finalist for the office, it might have been better to fail the search and start over.

During his time as President of the University of Alaska System, Jim Johnsen presided over devastating budget cuts imposed by the governor and an abortive drive to consolidate the system's institutions, and was the subject of multiple votes of no confidence by Faculty Senates at the University of Alaska’s constituent campuses. He admitted to his role in contributing to a 'fractured' university system, and there have been concerns expressed about his willingness to engage with faculty as part of the shared governance process. These facts are concerning.

This is a critical time for higher education in the state of Wisconsin: in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and sharp economic downturn it has caused, and amid demonstrations against racism, the next president of the UW System is going to face a number of challenges, not the least of which is how to manage declining enrollments at many of its institutions, how to ensure a rich array of programs to educate the next generation of citizens who will live in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, and how to ensure that higher education is adequately funded and remains relevant. These are big issues, and they demand serious attention from a leader who is willing to listen to, and to work with, the faculty on our campuses to solve them.