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As Wisconsin Goes

February 16, 2015

By [Paul Fain](#)

Wisconsin's governor, Scott Walker, hasn't announced a presidential run. But it's a safe bet that higher education will come up often if he seeks the Republican nomination, as many presume.

That's because the second-term governor has been cast, or positioned himself, as a primary antagonist of the academy.

During the last few weeks Walker has battled with the University of Wisconsin System over [budget cuts](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/28/wisconsin-looks-cut-higher-ed-300m-tries-give-something-return) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/28/wisconsin-looks-cut-higher-ed-300m-tries-give-something-return>) and an [abortive attempt](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/02/05/drafting-error-or-gubernatorial-assault-expansive-view-higher-ed-wisconsin) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/02/05/drafting-error-or-gubernatorial-assault-expansive-view-higher-ed-wisconsin>) to edit the Wisconsin Idea, the century-old and unusually beloved mission statement of the university.

The tumult probably hasn't reached the [intensity it did in 2011](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/03/28/wisconsin-republicans-look-for-union-policies) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/03/28/wisconsin-republicans-look-for-union-policies>), when Walker [challenged](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/06/06/university-of-wisconsin-madison-s-bid-for-autonomy-dies-but-underlying-is) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/06/06/university-of-wisconsin-madison-s-bid-for-autonomy-dies-but-underlying-is>) collective bargaining for public employee unions, including those of faculty members and graduate students. Back then he also [floated a plan](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/02/28/wisconsin-debates-whether-madison-should-stay-within-university-system) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/02/28/wisconsin-debates-whether-madison-should-stay-within-university-system>) for the state's flagship, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, to leave the university system.

But the net result has been the view that while Walker's office in the Capitol is a mile from the Madison campus, the two are worlds apart. And that can be an asset to a politician looking to cultivate the Republican base.

Alan Knox, a professor emeritus of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, [told](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/28/wisconsin-looks-cut-higher-ed-300m-tries-give-something-return) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/28/wisconsin-looks-cut-higher-ed-300m-tries-give-something-return>) *Inside Higher Ed* that Walker's budget plan "sounds more like a slogan for the Tea Party and presidential aspirations than a serious effort to look at what would improve the state or the University of Wisconsin System."

Walker had a different take on the budget proposal, which also would grant the university more autonomy.

"The people of Wisconsin deserve a government that is more effective, more efficient and more accountable," he said in a [written](#)

[statement \(http://walker.wi.gov/newsroom/press-release/transforming-education-governor-scott-walker-announces-plan-tuition-freeze\)](http://walker.wi.gov/newsroom/press-release/transforming-education-governor-scott-walker-announces-plan-tuition-freeze), “and this plan protects the taxpayers and allows for a stronger UW System in the future.”

The quest for efficiency factors into another piece of Walker’s higher education budget plan. He has [proposed eliminating \(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/02/04/wisconsin-gov-wants-cut-profit-regulatory-board\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/02/04/wisconsin-gov-wants-cut-profit-regulatory-board) the agency that oversees Wisconsin’s 244 for-profit institutions, the *Wisconsin State Journal* [reported \(http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/university/scott-walker-s-budget-cuts-for-profit-college-oversight-board/article_3b97dc7e-df79-5670-8ea8-21edb6caac10.html\)](http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/university/scott-walker-s-budget-cuts-for-profit-college-oversight-board/article_3b97dc7e-df79-5670-8ea8-21edb6caac10.html), citing a desire to “decrease the regulatory and fiscal burden” on the sector.

Degree Completer?

The oppositional narrative continued in a different form last week, when the 47-year-old governor’s lack of a bachelor’s degree was revisited by several [national \(http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-scott-walker-mulls-white-house-bid-questions-linger-over-college-exit/2015/02/11/8e17ea44-b13e-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35_story.html\)](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-scott-walker-mulls-white-house-bid-questions-linger-over-college-exit/2015/02/11/8e17ea44-b13e-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35_story.html) [media \(http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2015/02/11/scott-walker-dropped-out-marquette-but-his-education-campus-politics-set-him-ambitious-path/m41BjqlY9xAltCgR6z5CM/story.html\)](http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2015/02/11/scott-walker-dropped-out-marquette-but-his-education-campus-politics-set-him-ambitious-path/m41BjqlY9xAltCgR6z5CM/story.html) [outlets \(http://www.politico.com/story/2015/02/scott-walker-college-reunion-115115.html\)](http://www.politico.com/story/2015/02/scott-walker-college-reunion-115115.html). Pundits jumped into the fray, debating whether Walker’s departure from Marquette University in 1990, when he was 34 credits short of earning a degree in political science and economics, would be a liability during a quest for the White House.

Walker would be the first major candidate without a college degree since 1988, when former Senator Paul Simon of Illinois sought the Democratic nomination, *The New York Times* [reported \(http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/20/upshot/no-college-degree-maybe-you-can-still-be-president.html?_r=1&abt=0002&abg=1\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/20/upshot/no-college-degree-maybe-you-can-still-be-president.html?_r=1&abt=0002&abg=1). Barry Goldwater was the most recent nominee without a degree, earning the Republican nod in 1964. And Harry Truman was the last commander in chief without a college degree -- and the only one since 1901, according to *The Times*.

Yet as MSNBC reported, Democrats are [unlikely to criticize \(http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/president-without-diploma\)](http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/president-without-diploma) Walker’s early exit from Marquette.

The reason: to some it makes him seem more like a man of the people, meaning one of the [60 percent \(http://www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025#goal-issue\)](http://www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025#goal-issue) of American adults who do not hold a bachelor’s or associate degree or a certificate. And a strong academic pedigree isn’t always a plus in national politics -- [see \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/02/10/obama\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/02/10/obama) “Obama” and “professorial.”

The Wisconsin governor probably wouldn’t even be the only top Republican candidate without a four-year degree. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky also [kicked up a fuss \(http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2015/02/13/rand-pauls-claim-twice-in-one-day-that-he-has-a-biology-degree/\)](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2015/02/13/rand-pauls-claim-twice-in-one-day-that-he-has-a-biology-degree/) last week about his college credentials. He does not hold a bachelor’s, although the medical doctor graduated from Duke University’s School of Medicine.

Walker has said he always meant to finish his degree, but time just got away from him.

“I kept thinking I’d go back, got married, had one kid, had another kid, next thing you know... you’re worrying more about paying for your kids’ college education than you are for your own,” Walker [told \(http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/news/254266501.html\)](http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/news/254266501.html) the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* last year.

He made that statement when discussing the University of Wisconsin System’s FlexOption. That program, which Walker [pushed hard \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/07/09/wisconsin-seeks-competency-based-degree-program-without-help-western-governors\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/07/09/wisconsin-seeks-competency-based-degree-program-without-help-western-governors) for the university to create, offers an [emerging form \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/10/28/competency-based-education-arrives-three-major-public-institutions\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/10/28/competency-based-education-arrives-three-major-public-institutions) of competency-based education.

The FlexOption is one of most ambitious of competency-based programs at a public university. It includes a “direct assessment” associate degree, which is [completely untethered \(http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/04/22/competency-based-educations-newest-form-creates-promise-and-questions\)](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/04/22/competency-based-educations-newest-form-creates-promise-and-questions) from the credit-hour standard. The feds and regional accreditors have granted approval to just four institutions for that type of degree.

With self-pacing and the ability for students to earn credits by proving knowledge through assessments, competency-based education is designed to appeal to the [31 million Americans \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/07/29/clearinghouse-report-identifies-31-million-who-attended-college-didnt-complete\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/07/29/clearinghouse-report-identifies-31-million-who-attended-college-didnt-complete) who, like Walker, have some college credits but no degree.

The governor wants to someday enroll in the FlexOption to finish his bachelor’s, a spokeswoman [told \(http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/news/254266501.html\)](http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/news/254266501.html) the *Journal Sentinel* last year. He is waiting until the university offers the right degree, she said.

That timing may not work out, however. A presidential candidate’s schedule likely would test the flexibility of any degree program, even a direct assessment one.

In the meantime, Walker has plenty of higher education debates to keep him busy, even if he doesn’t run for president. His proposed funding cuts, for example, would strip \$300 million from the system’s budget during the next two years -- a 13 percent reduction in the state’s contribution.



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