



WISCONSIN
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities
2021 Assembly Bill 204

Prorated University of Wisconsin System housing and meal plan contracts

June 24, 2021

The University of Wisconsin-Madison thanks the committee for the opportunity to provide written testimony for information only on Assembly Bill 204, relating to prorated University of Wisconsin System housing and meal plan contracts.

University Housing at UW-Madison operates 21 residence halls across the campus, providing a residential living experience to around 8,000 undergraduate students. University Housing also operates three apartment communities, serving about 2,000 graduate students, researchers, staff, and faculty. University Housing also manages several dining locations around the UW-Madison and provides summer housing for different conference groups and youth camps. There is no live-in requirement for students (including freshmen) at UW-Madison, but occupancy rates are at or close to 100%.

University Housing is often where students turn first for academic, financial, mental health, and other resources. Due to the variety in types of rooms and meal plans, room and board rates range from \$10,400 to \$14,100 for the upcoming academic year. Undergraduate students who choose to live in University Housing consistently have better academic performance and higher retention rates than those students who choose to live off-campus.

In spring 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UW-Madison made the difficult decision to ask students, faculty, and staff to leave the campus for the scheduled spring break and not return for the remainder of the semester. Accommodations were made for those with limited options or could not return home. Less than one month later, University Housing announced that they would be providing prorated room refunds, as well as a refund for any remaining unused food account funds for those students who no longer lived in University Housing residence halls. The credit was applied to student accounts about two weeks after the announcement. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, University Housing has been flexible in allowing students out of their housing contracts if they no longer wanted to live on campus. University Housing was the recipient of CARES funding, but it was not specifically

tied to these refunds. It was of utmost importance to University Housing to do the right thing and issue these refunds for unused services.

As written, Assembly Bill 204 would prevent UW System campuses from entering “into a housing or meal plan contract unless the housing or meal plan contract is prorated to return to the student... because the student is not permitted to be present on campus for any reason imposed by the institution outside of the student’s control.” UW-Madison has concerns with the ambiguity in the language, as it might require University Housing to issue a prorated refund for a housing resident who has been asked to leave University Housing for disciplinary or other reasons that are not related to facility closure. The ability to ask residents to leave for disciplinary reasons is an important tool in behavior modification and was especially important during the past academic year to ensure residents followed testing/distancing protocols.

UW-Madison is planning for a return to normal operations for fall 2021. The campus academic, research, recreational and other facilities will be open. Nearly all of the courses that were offered in-person in fall of 2019 will return to in-person in fall 2021. Residence halls will be fully occupied with dining facilities open. We continue to adjust our campus policies and move toward normal operations throughout the summer.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the impact this legislation would have on UW-Madison. If you have any questions, please reach out to UW-Madison Director of State Relations Crystal Potts crystal.potts@wisc.edu or (608) 265-4105.



Office of Government Relations

Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Drive
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DATE: June 24, 2021

TO: Members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities

FROM: Jeff Buhrandt, UW-System Associate Vice President for Government Relations

RE: Written Testimony on Assembly Bill 204

Thank you Chairman Murphy and committee members for providing us an opportunity to speak to you today about Assembly Bill 204, and how the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents proactively addressed room and board costs for students who were impacted by the pandemic in the spring of 2020.

In March 2020, UWS took the unprecedented step of directing campuses to shift to a primarily online environment for the remainder of the spring semester. This action included encouraging students living on campus to return home and continue the semester remotely. This was done to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and protect the health of our students, faculty, staff, and the broader communities where our universities are located. Accommodations were made to allow students who did not want to leave or could not return home to stay on campus for the remainder of the semester. At no time were our campuses closed over the last year. Many students remained in the residence halls throughout the spring. For those students who did return home, we refunded a prorated amount of \$62 million in housing and dining costs.

UWS does not believe this bill is necessary as UWS already has the authority to provide prorated room and board fees, as was done in spring 2020, in a manner that is far more expansive and responsive.





DUEY STROEBEL

STATE SENATOR • 20TH DISTRICT

Testimony on AB 204

June 24, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Murphy and members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities for holding a public hearing on AB 204.

Last year many students in the University of Wisconsin system had their academic year cut short due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students unable to continue their studies in a resident setting, and who left campus to await the all clear to return, did not receive pro-rated reimbursement for certain fees. This was particularly true of housing and meal fees.

While perhaps no one could have anticipated the full impact of COVID-19 at the start of the semester in January of 2020, requiring students to bear the full cost of its impact is, frankly, absurd. COVID-19 certainly forced many organizations to re-assess their annual budget and adjust revenue and expense forecasts. That inconvenience alone does not justify requiring college students to pay for housing they no longer live in and meals they will no longer consume due to an absence from campus that is no fault of their own.

When a student leaves campus partway through the semester the UW system bears some, but not necessarily the full, weight of the initially projected cost of housing that student. Depending on the number of students who leave, there can be savings both in housing costs and food costs. Certainly, there is no cash windfall for the school, but there is also no reason why the student should carry the entire weight of the remaining cost.

AB 204 corrects a real problem, one that was never intended to cause harm to students but that, nevertheless, came to light in the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. Thank you for considering this legislation and I hope you will join Rep. Sortwell and me in supporting this bill.

Brian Shikoski
3821 Wayside Rd.
Greenleaf, WI 54126

Dear Sir's and Madames,

Please accept this letter in support of Representative Shae Sortwell's proposed bill AB204 requiring universities in the state system to refund dorm, meal plan, and any segregated fees during times when university students are told they are not needed to be on campus, such as during this ongoing pandemic.

Mr. Sortwell asked me to tell about my recent experiences with the state university system as the father of two students, one enrolled at UW Platteville and one at UW Eu-Claire.

In November of the autumn 2020 semester, students were sent an e-mail stating that after the thanksgiving holiday no in-person classes would be occurring and all classes would be virtual, so that there would be no need for students to remain on campus and arrangements would need to be made if students wanted to remain on campus for the remainder of the term. No refunds of dorm, meal plan or segregated fees would be refunded since students could remain on campus even though there was no need for them to do so. Keep in mind that first and second year students of a certain age and address are required to both live on campus and buy a meal plan.

This is in contrast to what occurred during the spring 2020 semester, when students were asked to leave campus and pro-rated dorm and meal plan fees were refunded, however, no segregated fees were returned. I am under the impression that the segregated fees that are demanded to be paid along with tuition go towards funding things like student groups and clubs, as well as certain other facilities, yet although students could not participate in these sorts of activities, none of the segregated fees were returned.

In addition, my son at the University of Platteville was recently told by staff that he could not access the school's indoor track facilities. Again, why are we being charged these confiscatory segregated fees and then not being refunded the money when access to the things they supposedly fund is denied?

And then the same people responsible for this graft tell us that we are all in this together. Anyone that says that is either a fool or a liar.

I hope that if legislation to address these inequities is passed that the legislature will exert some oversight over the university system to see that they do not impose other new and inventive ways to continue to grow their largesse at the expense of the state's student population.

Sincerely,

Brian Shikoski



SHAE SORTWELL

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 2nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Hearing Testimony
Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities
June 24, 2021
Assembly Bill 204

Representative Murphy and members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities – thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on AB 204, relating to prorated University of Wisconsin System housing and meal plan contracts.

In 2020, we all know our education system was in flux due to the handling of COVID. Usually, the conversations have been centered on K-12 students and the harsh reality they faced with virtual learning. However, rarely have we discussed the negative impact towards our college students.

Both spring and fall semesters of last year saw thousands of UW-college students being sent home to close out the remainder of the respective semester with virtual learning. This means that students are unable to enjoy certain items they pay thousands of dollars for, such as their housing and meal plans. Despite the unfortunate circumstance, one would think they get reimbursed for these items since they are not allowed to come back to campus. Well, for several months, many families reached out to their state representatives, including my constituent, from whom you will receive written testimony, with the complaint that their UW school had not reimbursed them a single penny from their housing and meal plans.

Eventually, families got some money back, likely due to the heavy pushback the universities received. Regardless, the purpose of this bipartisan bill is to codify in state law that students and families get reimbursed any value of the contract that the student cannot access because the student is not permitted to be present on campus for any reason imposed by the institution outside of the student's control.

Moreover, Amendment 1 to this bill is introduced as a supplement so that the UW schools “show their work” and not lowball students when they provide the prorated reimbursement.

I want to thank the committee for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions members of the committee may have.