



On the edge

JED CARLSON

Toby Marcovitch stands in front of the Douglas County Courthouse in Superior.

PRESIDENT OF REGENTS FEARS UW QUALITY IS SLIPPING AWAY

By Aaron Nathans
The Capital Times

SUPERIOR — At one time, Toby Marcovitch figured his University of Wisconsin law degree might take him far from his family's furniture shop, far from the iron ore shippers, to more sophisticated locales.

But he never could resist the pull back to the foggy streets of this port-side city. He became a successful trial attorney, a friend of two governors, and eventually the president of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents.

At the height of his power, however, he was charged with a distasteful task: presiding over some of the largest budget cuts the UW System has ever faced, and issuing major tuition increases.

He said he was willing to help his friend, Gov. Jim Doyle, do what needed to be done for the good of the state. But now, just weeks from the end of his tenure as a regent, Marcovitch said the university's quality and its role as a public institution are slipping away.

"I think we're really on the verge. I think we're right on the edge," Marcovitch said. Star professors are largely still in place, but without proper pay raises, they're likely to be lured away, he said. Fewer courses are being offered, class sizes are getting bigger, and counseling and advising have taken a hit, he said.

Middle-class families are having a harder time giving their children a public higher education, he said. "The pressure is on," Marcovitch said. "And if we don't have the money

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Toby Marcovitch, President of UW Board of Regents, career span

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to work with, yes, quality's going to be compromised."

Marcovich has been a transitional figure on the board. A lifelong Democrat in a blue-collar, historically union town, he realized his city needed economic help in the 1980s when the iron ore shipping and steel industry were in decline. Superior is the main shipping port for ore from Minnesota's Iron Range.

His law partner, Dennis Cochran, arranged a meeting between Marcovich and the Republican candidate for governor, Tommy Thompson. With the candidate promising re-investment in northern Wisconsin, Marcovich worked hard for Thompson, who carried Douglas County and won the election.

Thompson would later thank Marcovich in 1997 with a much-sought-after seat on the Board of Regents. He would be the only Democrat Thompson would appoint

to the board. Thompson provided the university with plenty of tax dollars, and didn't use ideology to interfere.

Marcovich said. Even during the Thompson years, how-

ever, Marcovich campaigned for the governor's political nemesis, Democratic Attorney General Jim Doyle, as he sought re-election. Marcovich was a student of Doyle's father at the UW Law School.

After Doyle became governor in 2003 and stacked the Board of Regents with his own appointees, "we realized Toby would make an excellent bridge," said Regent Roger Astel, another Thompson appointee.

Doyle's first executive budget called for the UW System to take a \$250 million cut, including \$150 million in tuition increases, which added up to students and their families paying 37.5 percent more over two years. Marcovich said he didn't enjoy doing it, but understood what the governor had to do during difficult financial times.

"We've got different jobs. My job has been to be an advocate for the university to grow and prosper. He's got to spread that money around," Marcovich said.

"One of the reasons he did it, he realized the university is one of the few state agencies, if you want to call it that, that has the ability raise money. That includes tuition and gifts, he said. "You don't get a lot of donors for a highway naming."

Marcovich was very frustrated with the tight budgets, having to operate in defensive mode and from so far away, Regent Vice President David Walsh said. But Marcovich has always taken joy in representing the northern part of the state, and in helping lawmakers understand that UW-Superior is primarily a resource for Wisconsin, not Detroit, Minn., which sits on a hill across a

bridge from Superior. "Toby's one of the most practical people I've ever met. Blunt, to the point, and more often right than wrong. He's got great instincts, and that's why I think he's such a great trial lawyer," said Walsh, also a longtime friend of the governor.

His presidency has included more upheaval than just budgetary matters. It has also included the departure of longtime UW President Katharine Lyle, and the hiring of UW Extension Chancellor Kevin Reilly to replace her. Many chancellors also departed in recent years, sparking an ongoing debate over whether it is appropriate to raise executive salaries during a period of tuition increases and budget cuts. The Regents have also tussled with the attorney general's office over open meetings and state cars.

Marcovich, 75, has used his sense of humor and quirky style to take the edge off the tension, as well as to mitigate the severity of the cuts. Astel said it's easy to overlook all of Marcovich's work behind the scenes, meeting with lawmakers and making the case for the university.

He tempers the bad times with good humor. He's not afraid to make fun of himself, which I think is an excellent quality," Astel said.

David Walsh said.

Reilly said Marcovich has been a strong supporter of keeping the university accessible to everyone.

Marcovich's outlook is "very much part of that American generation that has European roots, respecting the notion of the American dream, the role of American public higher education in it: 'We've got to keep the campuses open to the poorest families, to immigrant families, or we've betrayed our core values of who we are as a nation,'" Reilly said.

Doyle's latest budget calls for a \$50 million increase in state money to the UW System, while cutting \$15 million in administrative costs. Marcovich called it a "hold-the-line" budget. He said he hopes the economy will improve to the point where the university starts benefiting financially again.

With the Legislative Joint Finance Committee considering further cuts to the university, Wisconsin residents must consider whether they still believe in the value of a strong public education, available to everyone, he said. Higher education is a leveling device, giving people, no matter what their economic background, the ability to do better than their parents, he said.

"It was just understood in our family that you'd go to college and do well. Or else," Marcovich said.

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David Walsh

Toby Marcovich, career span, part 2



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