President Reilly and the Board of Regents, thank you very much for inviting me to speak on behalf of UW-Madison academic staff today. I am chair of the Academic Staff Executive Committee at UW-Madison, representing shared governance for more than 7500 academic staff. This is the largest permanent employee group on campus. As soon as I found out that I would be speaking today on the proposed separation, I sent a message out to our academic staff assembly representatives asking for their thoughts as well as those in their districts. As you might imagine, opinions were mixed from full steam ahead to proceed with caution to no way to I don’t know enough to decide. One thing that was prevalent through all these messages was passion for UW-Madison and a lot of interest in this issue. In sheer numbers, I have received more e-mails about this than I have about the budget repair bill or unit clarification.

One of those e-mails drew my attention back to the 2009 UW-Madison reaccreditation report. It is good to remind ourselves what others outside UW-Madison have said about our campus structure. In the report from the Higher Learning Commission, there is a section titled “The organization’s governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission.” In this section the evaluation team writes, “However, there are aspects of the institution’s governance and administrative structure and its regulatory context which cause continuing tensions and contradictory forces to impact the institution. These circumstances appear today to be much as described in the accreditation team report of ten years ago. Interestingly, what appears to have changed is the institution’s ability and determination to work with some of the restrictions with more success and less apparent friction among the entities involved. Still, because of state regulation and system processes, UW-Madison lacks many fundamental operating options that peer and competitor institutions typically enjoy.”

There has been a lot of information to internalize and sort through these last few days. Decisions of this magnitude shouldn’t be made in a matter of days so I am not ready nor are the academic staff as whole ready to give a yes or no on this proposal. The decision about whether this would be a positive change for UW-Madison and UW System relies on weighing the benefits and risks. What I will do during my time to speak with you is share the information that academic staff have been sharing with me.

First, let’s start with risks. Many responses I received mention concerns about the current political climate. As you know, we are not in control of the legislative process that such a bill would have to go through. While we do have influence, the final product is ultimately not one that we directly chose.

There are many who express reservations based on a concern for the socio-economic diversity of the student body. It is unrealistic to imagine a scenario where tuition will not continue to
rise regardless of whether Madison is separate or remains part of the UW System. However, there is a fear that it will rise faster if Madison goes alone, and that student aid would not be adequate to meet the needs of students.

Several of the e-mails I received point out the strong ties UW-Madison has forged with UW-Extension and commonalities that UW-Madison has developed with the other UW System schools. Some of these commonalities were developed directly due to our being part of UW System. There is fear that this extremely close type of collaboration might become more difficult and less prevalent if a separation occurs. Similarly some have expressed concern that we will end up battling each other for precious state resources.

These are just some examples of the real risks that should be fully explored, discussed, and dissected. The process going forward must be much more open than it has been, both in participation and in information. There must be a dialogue between all affected parties with solutions discussed to minimize risks if such a plan is undertaken.

On the issue of flexibilities, there seems to be nearly universal agreement among academic staff that UW-Madison needs additional flexibilities as mentioned in the 2009 reaccreditation report. Many of the flexibilities would be areas only tangentially related to academic staff such as construction and procurement. I will spend my time focusing on the one area that could have the most positive effect on academic staff, human resources. The current constraints of the human resource system from titling to salary ranges to promotional title sequences have long been an issue on the UW-Madison campus. While some of these issues are state controlled, many of them are controlled by UW system. These problems are created due to Madison’s size as well as the longevity of our academic staff. UW-Madison has approximately 7500 academic staff. That is at least 6000 more than our nearest cousin UW-Milwaukee. Because of this, we make extensive use of the titling system.

In the current titling system, there is a title series that are not promotable. Most titles for academic staff have a progression built in. Say for instance, you start as an Associate Advisor. After 3 or 4 years, you receive a promotion to the title Advisor with no prefix. Following your exemplary work on at least 7 years more, you finally reach the title Senior Advisor. Within the current titling system, anyone with a program manager title is unable to receive promotions in this manner.

In addition, academic staff with titles in category A (this includes everyone except many instructional and research staff) have salary ranges. Category A academic staff are the only category of unclassified staff with such restrictions. Going back to our advisor example, once you become a Senior Advisor and reach the top of the salary range, the only option for you to
obtain more than the average merit raise is to leave that position. For those in the non-promotable program manager titles, this happens at a much faster rate.

Lastly, there is little opportunity for promotion of academic staff within their current position when they reach the senior title with many years of their career left. I am an example of this. I have at least 20 more years in my career. Hopefully I will spend it here at UW-Madison, but I have already held a senior title for the last five years. While there is a fourth step to add a new prefix of distinguished to your title, currently only about 40 academic staff at Madison hold this title. Due to constraints in the criteria, the distinguished title has been very difficult for most academic staff to achieve, especially those who are not in research. These personnel issues as well as others do have the potential of being addressed if flexibilities are given to UW-Madison in the area of human resources.

Change creates fear and extreme change especially into a situation that is untested and relatively unknown is downright scary. The Board of Regents, UW System, UW System campuses and the UW-Madison community must not let fear guide their decision making or judgement. We must make an informed decision, based on the facts as presented, not an emotional one. Before a decision can be made, an open and honest debate must occur on the UW-Madison campus and elsewhere across the state. As one e-mail I opened yesterday read, “My comment is that I don’t have enough information about this to comment intelligently…I want to make it clear that THAT is my point, and it is an extremely important one.”