



The Wisconsin Idea

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The “Wisconsin Idea: Is it still alive and well?”

Today I want to talk about the “Wisconsin Idea”. I will define what is meant by the Wisconsin Idea, place it in an historical context, and outline some of the contributions to the state associated with the Wisconsin Idea. I will spend a bit more time discussing the condition of the Wisconsin Idea today and the challenges that, in my opinion, must be addressed if it is to remain a defining characteristic of the state’s culture.

Definition

The “Wisconsin Idea” represents one of the seminal changes in higher education. The phrase itself came into common usage as the result of a book titled The Wisconsin Idea, which was published in 1912. The bumper sticker definition of the Wisconsin Idea is that “the boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the state”. In practice, the Wisconsin Idea has two elements. The first part means that the University of Wisconsin System should serve the needs of the state. The expertise and research of the university should, according to this concept, be brought to bear on current issues facing the government and citizens of Wisconsin.

The other element in the Wisconsin Idea is that in return for its service to the state, the citizens of Wisconsin would provide **adequate** financial support to the university. Over time, there developed an acceptance of the idea that spending public dollars on the University of Wisconsin was a wise investment in the future of the state.

Just as the state of Wisconsin invested in building roads and other forms of physical infrastructure as a means of enhancing the well-being of citizens, so it invested in the University of Wisconsin to expand the intellectual infrastructure of the state with the same end in mind.

Historical Context

The idea of a university serving the practical interests of the state was a somewhat radical one but not without precedent. In 1862 the U.S. government passed the Morrill Act, which created the system of Land Grant Universities in order to focus on practical issues facing agriculture and the mechanical arts. Prior to Land Grant Universities, most colleges provided a “classical education”, which focused on the traditional liberal arts (history, literature, composition, etc) and a working knowledge of the “dead languages” (Greek and Latin). From early on, the legislature pressured the University of Wisconsin to embrace the practical orientation that would come to be associated with the Land Grants. In 1859, the Wisconsin Legislature stated, “[the university] shall primarily be adapted to the popular needs, that its courses of instruction shall be arranged to meet as fully as possible the wants of the greatest number of our citizens.” (p. 110, “The Wisconsin Idea: The University’s Service to the State,” Jack Stark, Leg Ref Bureau, WI Blue Book, 1995-96).

The Land Grant Universities represented a belief that the systematic application of the scientific method with academic rigor could solve problems facing the nation.

While this belief would prove to be true to an amazing degree, the original conception had a major design flaw. At the time the Land Grant Universities came into existence, no clear means existed to move the results achieved on the university campuses out to the people of the state who could put them to practical use. The Wisconsin Idea (1912) and the creation of the Extension Service (1913) were both responses to the need for a conduit through which the intellectual capital of the universities could be placed at the service of the citizens.

The practices associated with the Wisconsin Idea predate the phrase that has come to describe them. Starting in the late 1880s, the university started offering “Farmer Institutes” and “Short Courses,” which were designed to address the practical educational needs of the state’s farm population. These courses were the first such educational offerings in the country. In 1890 Dr. Stephen Babcock, a University of Wisconsin professor, developed a quick and relatively simple way to test milk for butterfat content, and hence its quality for cheese making. The Babcock Test was estimated to save the state’s cheese makers’ more than twice the annual budget for the University of Wisconsin! So, nearly 20 years before the term the Wisconsin Idea was coined, the university was intimately involved in the issues facing the state.

In 1908, then president of the university, Dr Charles Van Hise, stated that “It is not enough for knowledge to exist in books to be obtained by men under favorable circumstances; the knowledge must be carried out to the people.” Under Van Hise’s

direction, the University of Wisconsin experienced an extraordinarily productive period in its relationship with the state. The rise of the Progressives within the Republican Party (Governor Robert La Follette) coincided with the commitment of the university to be of service to the state. Some of the university's more important contributions to the state during this period include:

- 1909 – Municipal Reference Bureau started (has evolved into the Local Government Center) to collect data and offer information to municipal governments
- 1910 – UW professors helped design Wisconsin's state income tax system, which was the first workable one in the nation
- 1911 – UW professors helped design the country's first workmen's compensation system
- 1911 – UW College of Agriculture started one of the first agricultural extension services in the country – three years before Federal funds became available for such purposes
- 1912 – UW professors helped draft the State's first minimum wage legislation
- 1914 – UW began using the new medium of radio to deliver educational programming

In addition, professors frequently served on governmental commissions and as official or unofficial advisors to governors in this era. In short, the relationship between the state and the university was close and productive. The breadth and quality of the services provided by the university established the Wisconsin Idea on the national scene as an important new model for higher education.

The Wisconsin Idea Today

I believe that the Wisconsin Idea remains a viable and important concept for the future well-being of both the state and the university. In particular, the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and the other 4-year, non-doctoral granting campuses, commonly called the “comprehensive” campuses, are well-placed to be the primary engines for the Wisconsin Idea. The Wisconsin Idea is also under tremendous stress from changes within academia, the state, and society at large. Let me first sketch out my argument for why the Wisconsin Idea remains so central to this state and the UW-System.

The Importance of the Wisconsin Idea to the State. Wisconsin is a relatively poorly educated state, despite significant investments in the UW-System. According to Census estimates, as of 2003, 24.1 percent of the state’s citizens 25 and older had earned a college degree compared to 32.7 percent in Minnesota. In terms of the proportion of the population with a college degree, Wisconsin ranks 36 out of 50! There are several reasons for this relatively lackluster educational performance. First, Wisconsin ranks 50th out of the 50 states in terms of the number of people moving to the state with a bachelor’s degree. I am not sure if this dismal performance is because of the length of our winters, our reputation as a heavily manufacturing-dependent state, or the magnetism of the two major metropolitan areas that sit on our doorsteps (Chicago and the Twin Cities). Whatever the reason, the bottom line is that if we don’t educate them within the state, we won’t have a very highly educated population. Second, Wisconsin

has a relatively small number of private colleges and is, therefore, extremely dependent upon the UW-System to generate college graduates. Therefore, the ability of the UW-System to meet the educational needs of the population is critical. This fact is brought home by the fact that even though the two states have nearly the same total population, there are 147,221 students enrolled in public institutions in Wisconsin compared to only 116,498 in Minnesota.

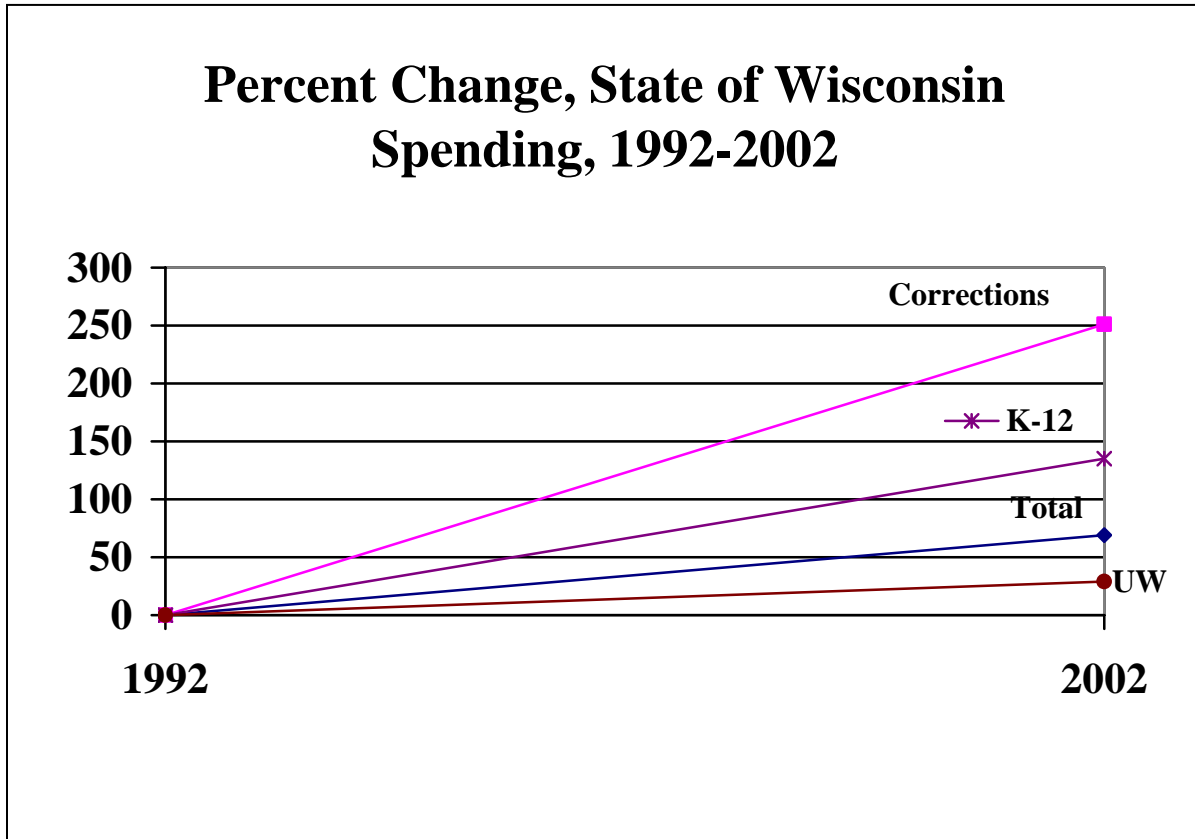
Educational attainment is more than a nice thing. Educational attainment is critical to the future well-being of the state and its citizens. We know that a person with a college degree earns about \$1,000,000 more over his or her lifetime than someone with a high school diploma alone. I noted above that the percentage of Minnesotans with college degrees is 8.6 % greater than it is in Wisconsin. One practical result of this differential is that the annual per capita income in Minnesota is \$3,545 more than in Wisconsin. Given Wisconsin's population of 5,472,299, our state would have **\$19.4 billion more per year in income** if our residents had the same level of education and earnings as our friends across the river.

We live in a globalized economy in which capital can move from River Falls to Frankfurt, Germany or Bangkok, Thailand, in the blink of an eye. Although capital can move anywhere in the world with awesome speed, labor is not nearly so mobile. The owners of capital increasingly feel empowered to move their capital to where it generates the most favorable rewards relative to the risks incurred. In practical terms,

capital mobility means that workers in Wisconsin are in competition not only with workers in Minnesota and elsewhere in the U.S. but also with workers around the world. Our ability to maintain prosperity will depend almost entirely on our ability to be creative and productive. Generally speaking, productivity and creativity come from education and training. Hence, the Wisconsin Idea, with its focus on bringing the expertise and instruction of the UW-System to the people of the state, remains a powerful and critically important concept.

The Importance of the Wisconsin Idea to the University. Funding for higher education is in crisis. The cost to our students (and their parents) of a college education has been increasing at double-digit rates for the past decade. Part of this increase is the result of higher costs for laboratory equipment, information technology, and other pieces of physical capital. Another part is the rising cost of obtaining the services of talented people who have alternative job prospects. The major part, however, derives from a political decision to shift more of the cost of a college education to students and their families. When I came to Wisconsin 15 years ago, the state covered roughly 67 percent of the cost of a student's education and the student was responsible for the other 33 percent. Today, students are being asked to cover more than 40 percent of this cost. Today, Wisconsin spends 25 percent less per capita on higher education than do the citizens of Minnesota and Iowa.

This policy shift is reflected in state spending patterns. As shown in the following chart, the state budget has increased 69 percent over the past 10 years. In contrast, state spending on the UW-System over the same period increased by 29 percent. For comparison, spending on corrections increased by 250 percent and state



spending on K-12 education by 135 percent. Finally, from January 1992 to December 2002, the Consumer Price Index for the Midwestern U.S., a measure of inflation for this region, increased by 31 percent so the real level of support provided by the state actually fell over this period. Clearly, the state has priorities other than higher education.

Popular and political support for the University of Wisconsin has been relatively strong in the state for much of its history. I believe that, to a significant degree, this support has been based on the widespread appreciation of the value of the UW to the State's economic, social, and cultural well-being. Because the university has helped solve pressing problems facing the state (e.g. Babcock's simple butterfat test), the case for investing public resources in higher education has been a strong and convincing one. So, at one level, the Wisconsin Idea is essential to the university as a means of maintaining and building popular support for state funding of the system.

The Wisconsin Idea is also important to the university as a means of diversify our revenue streams in the face of stagnant or declining state support. One form of diversification is grant funding and the UW-System has been extraordinarily effective in tapping these funds. Even at UW-River Falls, with our heavy teaching loads, the faculty and staff typically receive between \$2 and \$3 million in grant funding each year. Such efforts are likely to continue to be necessary for the System's viability.

However, if we truly believe that the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state, we will have to do a much better job making this a reality. As noted, there are 147,221 students enrolled public 4-year institutions in Wisconsin. The U.S. Census estimates that as of July 2004, there were 3,485,472 people in Wisconsin between the ages of 18 and 64. So, our "market share" is only 4.2 percent – we have enormous upside potential! If we throw in the Senior Outreach market, we have an

additional 715,568 prospective students. Obviously, not all of these people are going to be interested in educational offerings from the UW every year. But we need to do a better job of serving their needs when they arise. Doing so in a cost-effective way may well be the difference between prosperity and extinction for the System.

Perils facing the Wisconsin Idea in the 21st Century

So, if the Wisconsin Idea remains so important, why do I also think that it is in peril, not only from the lack of state funding outlined above, but also from social and academic trends? At least two social changes imperil the Wisconsin Idea.

Societal threats to the Wisconsin Idea. The first social trend is what seems to me to be a fairly widespread suspicion of institutions, particularly public institutions, that has developed in this country. Some of this suspicion is probably well-earned given disappointments we have experienced at the hands of our public institutions (the wars in Viet Nam and Iraq, Watergate, Vioxx, etc.). This suspicion is almost certainly related to at least twenty-five years of political rhetoric, from both sides of the aisle but particularly from the Republicans, about the shortcomings of the public sector and the superiority of the private sector. Given that the first great flowering of the Wisconsin Idea came under Republican administrations, this contempt for the public sector is a somewhat bitter irony.

The second societal stress factor has to do with our current busy lifestyles, our sense of entitlement, and our short attention spans. Data also show that Americans are

working more hours per week and per year than we did 10, 20 and 30 years ago. Family obligations are also more time demanding. Children's activities are more highly organized and generally have much more parental involvement than when I was young. The prototypical "soccer mom" works a 40-50 hour work week at her job outside the home and, with her husband who is similarly employed, juggles housework, homework, music lessons, soccer practices, involvement in civic organizations, and travel to watch the little ones play soccer at home and in towns in the region. Who has time for the Wisconsin Idea?

Besides not having time, Americans seem to feel that we have an entitlement to our very privileged lifestyle. I tell my students that upon graduation, if they find a job paying them more than about \$17,000 per year they will be in the top 10 percent of the world's richest people. We resent it if jobs are outsourced or if illegal immigrants appear in our communities and accept salaries that put downward pressure on everyone's earnings. We seem to feel that we deserve to be wealthy (by world standards) just because we are Americans. So, rather than look at the root challenge (how to be creative and productive), we choose protectionism as our response. Who has need for the Wisconsin Idea?

Knowledge, understanding, and mastery of a subject matter do not happen quickly and without considerable effort. We have not found much that increases educational productivity. It is a slow process. Slow, methodical, painstaking effort is

not something that our society is particularly interested in at the moment. We are an impatient society. The immediate pay-off of steroids in terms of the ability to hit home runs or provide better protection to a quarterback is emblematic of the impatience. Similarly, I receive several unsolicited emails each week telling me that I can “earn” a college degree in as little as two weeks from on-line institutions. Who has the patience required for the Wisconsin Idea?

Academic threats to the Wisconsin Idea. The current academic culture, particularly in research-oriented universities, also presents a serious threat to the Wisconsin Idea. Prestige in academia is very closely associated with research and publication in peer-reviewed journals. Academic superstars are those who bring in the most grant funding and publish the most in top-tier academic journals. The audience, indeed the only people who can fully understand and appreciate most of these writings, is a handful of like-minded academics. The primary funding sources for such grants are national (National Science Foundation, the Pew Foundation, etc.), and they are interested in issues affecting the nation (e.g. cancer research) or the world (e.g. global warming). In short, the bumper sticker definition of the Wisconsin Idea, “the boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the state,” is too confining for the modern academic researcher. It is absolutely necessary for researchers to take on these big issues and the breakthroughs that result will benefit the particular state in which the university is located. But the notion of a major research university being in service

primarily to the state in which it is located is probably no longer realistic. In short, the mutual obligations between the state and the university are much less viable today than they were a century ago.

In contrast, I believe that the 4-year comprehensive institutions, such as UW-River Falls, are well-placed to carry on the Wisconsin Idea. The incentive structure in institutions such as ours is more balanced between teaching, research and service. To be sure, the primary focus of the comprehensives is on undergraduate education, but we also value scholarly activity, especially applied research, and service.

Further, the Wisconsin Idea is complementary to a primary focus on undergraduate instruction. Many of our students are the first in their family to attend college. They expect to emerge from the university with skills and abilities that are valued by society and that will allow them to find a good job. As such, our students demand sound instruction **and** up-to-date curricula. Having our faculty, staff, and students actively engaged in the community, helping citizens wrestle with problems or capitalize on opportunities, and lending their expertise in useful ways is an effective means of ensuring a relevant curriculum.

Changes needed to sustain the Wisconsin Idea. If we are to be effective torchbearers of the Wisconsin Idea, however, we need a new operational model for UW-River Falls and the other comprehensives. Currently, a full-time teacher on this campus teaches four 3-credit courses per term or 24 credits over two semesters. On top

of this teaching load, which is high by national standards, our faculty (are expected to) participate in committees and student extra-curricular activities, advise students, carry out in scholarly activities, and provide our expertise to the broader community. Over the past decade, the UW-System has reduced the number of teaching positions by approximately 1,000 and increased the number of students attending our institutions by about 10,000. Our salaries are consistently at the bottom of our peer institutions, making recruitment and retention of young faculty quite challenging. The day-to-day time pressures on faculty make it very difficult to do justice to the Wisconsin Idea.

If we are serious about preserving the Wisconsin Idea, we must create some time in the schedules of our faculty, adequately compensate them for their efforts on behalf of the state, and ensure that these efforts are given proper consideration in tenure and promotion decisions.

One way to gain time in faculty schedules would be to create a fund that could be used to “buy out” one or more classes for a rotating set of professors each semester or year. The professors participating in such a program would be determined based on prioritized needs in the region, the expertise needed to address these priorities, the willingness of faculty to participate and the availability of substitute teachers. A fund of \$200,000 for UW-River Falls could buy-out about 50 classes and could free a comparable number of faculty to work on regional issues. This seems a small price to pay to maintain The Wisconsin Idea.

Conclusion

The Wisconsin Idea, which bound the University of Wisconsin System to addressing the issues confronting the state, has been a powerful concept for over 100 years. I believe that it has served the interests of both the university and the state. The relationship between the state and the university is currently under stress and both sides bear some of the blame. Funding levels provided by the state have not been adequate – we are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit top caliber faculty because our salaries are substantially behind those offered by similar universities in other states. On the comprehensive campuses, our teaching loads also tend to be heavier than those of our peers in other states. On the other hand, incentive structures within academia tend to result in relatively short shrift being given to state issues. As a result, the importance and relevance of the UW-System is being questioned by our friends in the legislature. We can allow this erosion to continue or, for a relatively modest sum, revitalize the Wisconsin Idea for the next century.