



The Wisconsin Idea

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Wisconsin is known for many things, including, in no particular order, the Green Bay Packers, the Badgers, brats, cheese, dairy farms, Harley Davidson motorcycles, numerous lakes and streams, and abundant natural beauty. However, perhaps the most far reaching and significant aspect of our identity as a state is not a readily recognizable icon or tangible product but a concept, or more specifically, an idea—an idea that has come to be known as the “Wisconsin Idea.”

What exactly is the Idea and why is it important? Why is there a “Wisconsin Idea” but not an “Illinois Idea” or a “Minnesota Idea”? What concepts are reflected by the Idea and how do they distinguish us from the residents of other states?

The Wisconsin Idea has meant different things to different people at different times. Educators, bureaucrats, scientists, writers, and politicians have all used the expression in differing contexts to refer to an aspect of the relationship between the University of Wisconsin, state government in Wisconsin, and the citizens of Wisconsin. The most commonly offered definition of the Wisconsin Idea is that “the boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the state,” which refers to the University of Wisconsin’s service to Wisconsin state government and Wisconsin citizens. However, this definition falls short of explaining what the Idea actually means or the programs, policies, and products that have stemmed from the Idea. The first step in understanding the Wisconsin Idea is to look at the context that first gave it life.

ROOTS OF THE IDEA

The Wisconsin Idea grew out of a series of fortunate circumstances. Wisconsin became a state in 1848, and one year later the university was established. The fact that the University of Wisconsin campus and the seat of state government were both located in Madison, barely a mile apart, provided a natural connection which facilitated the partnership that soon developed. The proximity of the seat of learning and the seat of government, coupled with the fact that both institutions were organized at about the same time, provided the fertile environment for the Idea to take root.

The second fortuitous circumstance was the friendship between Charles Van Hise, president of the University of Wisconsin from 1903 to 1918, and Robert M. La Follette, governor of Wisconsin from 1901 to 1905. The former North Hall dorm friends worked closely together and shared the view that professors should put their academic research and technical expertise to use by helping state government solve social and political problems. Van Hise declared that he “would never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every family in the state.” “Fighting Bob” La Follette, leader of the Progressive movement, who later served in the U.S. Senate, stated that his goal was to take advantage of the resources of the university to strengthen state government. He did this by appointing more than 40 university professors to various state boards and commissions.

The third factor that gave rise to the Wisconsin Idea had to do with the contributions of Charles McCarthy, who, after receiving his Ph.D. in American history from the university, found himself in need of a job. In 1901 McCarthy, an Irish immigrant from Brockton, Massachusetts, found work as a legislative documents clerk. From this modest beginning, McCarthy went on to shape the future of Wisconsin state government. He transformed the job of collecting state documents into a new agency that became the primary source of information for legislators and state government. The Legislative Reference Library was more than a repository of documents: it served as a clearinghouse of ideas, information, and knowledge. McCarthy’s diligence and enthusiasm, and his association with progressive thinkers at the university, made him a key resource for legislators seeking to enact legislation. McCarthy is also credited with popularizing the Wisconsin Idea. He wrote a book with that title and documented the remarkable range of legislative initiatives that resulted from the partnership of politicians, professors, and administrators.

THE IDEA BEARS FRUIT

The combination of fortunate coincidences created the climate that led to the birth of the Wisconsin Idea; it was the need for practical solutions to problems facing the state, though, that nourished the Idea and gave it substance.

A first beneficiary was the Wisconsin dairy industry. When Wisconsin first became a state, wheat was the most important crop and dairy farming was secondary. Due to problems caused by

diseases and pests, soil depletion, and fluctuating prices, Wisconsin farmers began to look for ways to diversify and increase profits. To do this they looked to the university for technical help. The College of Agriculture produced valuable research and provided practical tools which directly led to Wisconsin's status as "America's Dairyland." Stephen Babcock, a university chemist, developed a simple, accurate test to determine the fat content of milk. Cheese makers used the Babcock Test to evaluate the quality of milk, and the test was invaluable in producing quality cheese. Other research focused on such diverse topics as round silos, tuberculosis in cattle, potato research, and how to keep cans of peas from exploding. In addition, the university offered "farmer institutes" and "short courses," which were held during the winter, were of short duration, and required only a "common school education." The programs, with their emphasis on providing farmers with practical advice, were an immediate success. It was estimated that 50,000 farmers attended the first sessions.

Wisconsin's farmers and dairy industry benefited greatly from the research and discoveries attributable to the enterprising climate associated with the Wisconsin Idea. As important as these contributions were, they were primarily technical and practical in nature and designed to remedy existing problems. Equally as important were the governmental reforms that were enacted. This legislation was innovative and visionary and a direct outgrowth of the principles of good government embodied by the Wisconsin Idea. Laws were adopted to make government more responsive to the people rather than special interests and included reforms of the election process, civil service, minimum wage and fair employment practices, worker safety, taxation, and utility regulation. Many of these laws were the first of their type and served as the model for legislation in the rest of the nation.

Following the Progressive era, the intellectual and creative energy nurtured by the Idea continued to inspire both researcher and administrator. They included such luminaries as

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—Adlai Stevenson

environmentalists John Muir and Aldo Leopold, and Edwin Witte, the architect of social security, who was both a university economist and state administrator.

THE WISCONSIN IDEA TODAY

The influence of the Wisconsin Idea was at its height during the first part of the 20th century when it served as a blueprint for political and social reform. Since that time, several factors have contributed to a gradual lessening of its influence on policymakers. The first is obvious: the relationship between La Follette and Van Hise was unique, and the impetus for change that grew from their relationship ebbed when they left their respective offices. Other factors have more to do with the changing political climate and the growth of government. The professionalization of the legislature and the growth of the executive branch can be viewed both as a byproduct of the Idea and as a broader source of public policy expertise that reduces reliance on the university. Similarly, the growth of interest groups representing all parts of the political spectrum makes more information more readily available to policymakers. Also, the sometimes

uneasy relationship between the university, the governor, and the legislature—often impacted by budget issues—has at times been a disincentive to cooperation.

Although it can be argued that the Wisconsin Idea does not have the same power it once did as an engine that drives social and political change, it is still significant to our identity as a state and is an enduring element of our social fabric. Nationally, the Idea has come to epitomize an enlightened role of government that exists solely to serve the people. Adlai Stevenson, statesman, Illinois governor, and two-time candidate for president in the 1950s, saw its significance in a larger context: "The Wisconsin tradition meant more than simple belief in the people. It also meant a faith in the application of intelligence and reason to the problems of society. It meant a deep conviction that the role of government was not to stumble along like a drunkard in the dark, but to light its way by the best torches of knowledge and understanding that it could find."

The sharing of ideas and expertise between the university and state government has been a constant for over a century. That relationship, expressed by the phrase "Wisconsin Idea," has come to describe the partnership between the academic world and government for the benefit of the common good. The discoveries, inventions, and legislation that can be considered the fruit of the Idea have improved and enriched the lives not only of Wisconsin residents but also of the entire nation. Wisconsin pioneered that approach and led the way as other states took note of the benefits and prosperity that followed. Today that model of institutional cooperation is commonplace at the federal level as well as in most states.

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Governing Wisconsin: "The Wisconsin Idea"

Study Questions

1	List three ways in which the Wisconsin Idea influenced the rest of the nation.	
2	Why did Charles Van Hise and "Fighting Bob" La Follette think that a relationship between the government and the university would "strengthen state government"?	
3	How are the Packer Cheeseheads and the Wisconsin Idea related?	
4	Look back at the quote by Adlai Stevenson. What problems in policy making was the Wisconsin Idea trying to prevent?	
5	In 1921, the UW Regents turned down private money for research, arguing that the gift would violate the principle of democratic state education. Is this consistent with the Wisconsin Idea?	
6	The Regents' decision (see item 5) in 1921 did not hold. Today, more than half of the UW's budget comes from private and federal funding. What are some effects of this changing relationship?	

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Study Questions in the Cognitive Domain

1	List three ways in which the Wisconsin Idea influenced the rest of the nation.	The Wisconsin Idea inspired reforms, such as minimum wage, civil service, worker safety, tax reform, and utility regulation, that later served as a model for the rest of the nation.	Cognition
2	Why did Charles Van Hise and “Fighting Bob” La Follette think that a relationship between the government and the university would “strengthen state government”?	These two friends thought the research done at the university could help the government make informed policy decisions. The university could help find practical solutions to state problems.	Comprehension
3	How are the Packer Cheeseheads and the Wisconsin Idea related?	UW–Madison chemist, Stephan Babcock, developed a fat test for cheese, which encouraged struggling wheat farmers to change to dairy farming. This relationship between the state and the university helped to make Wisconsin “America’s Dairyland.” The Packers' famous cheesehead hats proudly symbolize this.	Application
4	Look back at the quote by Adlai Stevenson. What problems in policy making was the Wisconsin Idea trying to prevent?	If decisions are not based on reason, they could be based on, among other things, unsupported personal opinion, self-interests, interests of the party, superstition, public pressure, or tradition.	Analysis
5	In 1921, the UW Regents turned down private money for research, arguing that the gift would violate the principle of democratic state education. Is this consistent with the Wisconsin Idea?	The Regents saw their decision as protecting the Wisconsin Idea. If the UW took private research money, its efforts would be directed toward private interests and not the common good. The Regents also felt it was the state's responsibility to fund research at public universities.	Synthesis
6	The Regents' decision (see item 5) in 1921 did not hold. Today, more than half of the UW's budget comes from private and federal funding. What are some effects of this changing relationship?	(1) That the UW competes for, and wins, outside funds allows it to remain a top university; (2) the federal government plays a larger role in funding research for the common good; (3) the state feels less obligated to fund research when the UW gets outside money; and (4) research might be guided by private interests.	Evaluation