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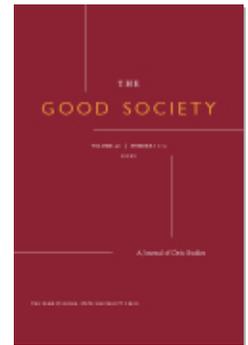
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# Civic Inspiration or Civic Disillusionment? The Mixed Legacy of the Wisconsin Idea

DAVID J. WEERTS

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## Abstract

*The Wisconsin Idea is a widely acclaimed late nineteenth-century vision for Wisconsin higher education that promotes democratic engagement, the search for truth, and developing knowledge of importance to Wisconsin citizens. While the Wisconsin Idea is often celebrated as an enduring feature of public higher education in Wisconsin, this paper points to a myriad of cultural, economic, and political forces that have reshaped its meaning. Among these forces, fragmenting purposes of higher education, globalization, and changes in state political culture have edited understandings of the Wisconsin Idea in ways that have eliminated its moral and democratic purposes. These shifts that occurred throughout the twentieth century and early twenty-first mirror changes in the broader American higher education landscape. Ultimately, such changes have resulted in divided lives among students, faculty, staff, and administrators that seek wholeness, connection, and deep civic purposes in their work. This paper retraces the Wisconsin Idea's history and concludes with a discussion about ways in which its early notions might be revived to inspire new thinking about higher education's role in society.*

**Keywords:** *higher education, Wisconsin Idea, democratic engagement, civic renewal, public universities*

In his influential book, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life*, Parker Palmer argues that the majority of people are living lives disconnected from their deep convictions, identities, and desires for “doing good” in the world. Palmer suggests that it is not a failure of ethics but rather “a failure of human wholeness.”<sup>1</sup> Palmer’s work is well aligned with the core theme of the Civic Reconstruction of Higher Education Conference (November 13, 2018, Minneapolis), which was convened on the idea that many of our university students, faculty, staff, and administrators are living divided lives. Conference facilitators offered several underlying questions to interrogate this disconnection and the role that higher education might play in reconstructing wholeness and, with it, a renewed civic culture in American society. Such questions include “Why does this bifurcation exist? What historical and contemporary examples offer lessons and inspiration for those seeking to model, promote, and educate for citizen professionalism in higher education?”

The purpose of this article is to address these underlying questions through a historical analysis of the Wisconsin Idea. Through my analysis, I illustrate a complicated legacy whereby the Wisconsin Idea simultaneously explains the emergence of divided lives within with academy but also lights a way toward wholeness and civic renewal. To summarize my argument, the Wisconsin Idea is a late nineteenth-century vision for Wisconsin higher education that promoted democratic engagement, the search for truth, and developing knowledge of importance to Wisconsin citizens.<sup>2</sup> In its earliest form, the Wisconsin Idea embodied social cohesion, democratic engagement, and religious commitments held by European settlers.<sup>3</sup> As has been discussed elsewhere, these early ideals of the Wisconsin Idea were paradoxical in expression as Native Americans were excluded from this covenantal community.<sup>4</sup>

Amid these contradictions, state population growth, and increasingly fragmented purposes of higher education, the Wisconsin Idea came to be viewed as the University of Wisconsin’s (UW) mission to provide service and economic goods to individuals, state citizens, and the world. The economic turmoil of 1970s, changes in religious and political thought, UW system reforms, globalization, and the aggressive pursuit of revenue among college leaders began to splinter the legacy of the Wisconsin Idea in ways that eliminated moral and democratic purposes of higher education. Among the fallout was that academicians had few opportunities to connect their work with their broader convictions about what it means to live a good life or to create a good society— notions that were central to the philosophical origins of the Wisconsin Idea. Filling this moral and intellectual

vacuum, the Wisconsin Idea was rebranded to fit the new economic and political realities of American higher education. In the following sections, I retrace this history and conclude with a discussion about ways in which the early notions of the Wisconsin Idea might be revived in ways that inspire new ways of thinking about higher education's role in society.

### John Bascom and the Social Gospel: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Wisconsin Idea

On June 12, 1838, Congress approved a “Seminary of Learning in the Territory of Wisconsin,” which provided a land grant and prompted the creation of a Board of Visitors in the territory. Wisconsin, like the other emerging state universities, maintained vestiges of early colonial colleges, which mixed civil agency and purpose. The “public good” served by the university during this period focused on preserving knowledge and creating a virtuous society. UW’s first president, John Lathrop, articulated this view of the university in his 1849 inaugural address:

And if this state university is to be the chosen instrumentality by which Wisconsin shall discharge her duty to man, then shall it indeed accomplish a glorious destiny, by ministering in no humble degree to the advancement of the cause of God in this world, which is none other than the cause of human intelligence and virtue—the great cause of an ever progressive civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next twenty years there were major influences that shifted these early creeds about UW. These include the passing of the Morrill Act in 1862, a growing emphasis on utilitarian purposes of higher education, and influence of the German model of higher education.<sup>6</sup> Many fledgling state university leaders of the day had the challenge of reconciling this new focus on advancing and disseminating knowledge with their previous religious traditions. John Bascom, who served as president between 1874 and 1887, made such a contribution at Wisconsin and, in doing so, laid the intellectual foundation for the Wisconsin Idea.<sup>7</sup> A theologian and professor of rhetoric, his theology departed from his Calvinist upbringing and instead embraced a liberal protestant theology of the social gospel.<sup>8</sup> Like other post-millennialists of the era, Bascom embraced the view that human evolutionary progress would bring forth ultimate redemption on earth. His theology

harmonized social gospel movements and rational elements of progressive reform. It promoted naturalism over supernatural intervention as a means of hastening the kingdom of heaven, and as a result, redirected religious energy toward social reform efforts.<sup>9</sup>

Bascom's postmillennial theology was uniquely suited to advancing the goals of the modern research university. Within this belief system, knowledge creation and its application to society was viewed as a divine project and the work of progressive reformers and social scientists was providential. Bascom's leadership occurred within the Gilded Age—a time in which the predatory wealth of lumber barons was threatening the economic and social well-being of the state.<sup>10</sup> Bascom saw the work of the university as promoting redemptive change in society, and his view was that the state—rather than voluntary associations or individuals—should be charged with carrying out this vision by creating a social order. Such a view would become central point of conflict nearly a century later.<sup>11</sup>

Bascom's social gospel was both unifying and contentious. His moral philosophy appealed to established families and newer transplants with New England Puritan roots,<sup>12</sup> but influential regents deemed that Bascom was spending too much time on partisan social issues, namely prohibition, which they viewed as detrimental to the university. In 1886, Bascom offered a reluctant resignation to the Board of Regents, which was accepted.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Bascom's legacy is one that ultimately gave license to professors in taking on controversial social causes. Only a few years later in 1894, famed economics Professor Richard Ely was put on trial by the Board of Regents for teaching socialism and supporting local strikers in a labor dispute. Ely was formally exonerated, and then president Charles Kendell Adams penned a famous resolution about the institution's commitment to "sifting and winnowing" in search for the truth. The statement became a nationally celebrated expression of Wisconsin's commitment to academic freedom, which is considered a critical component of the Wisconsin Idea story.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the nineteenth-century origins of the Wisconsin Idea were situated within theological traditions that cultivated intellectual and moral influence in the state. Bascom's influence in this regard is twofold. First, his vision paved the way for Ely and his colleagues who made the institution famous for its commitment to academic freedom and commitment to social concerns. Second, his moral philosophy about the role of the university in society inspired his own students, Robert LaFollette and Charles Van Hise, to take the helm in building a state-university partnership that would make

the institution a national leader among the emerging research universities of the early twentieth century.

### The Wisconsin Idea: The Progressive Era Meets the Academic Revolution

At Wisconsin, Charles Van Hise (UW president, 1903–1918) and Robert La Follette (governor of Wisconsin, 1901–1906; U.S. senator 1906–1926) were greatly influenced as undergraduates by the mentorship and theology of John Bascom.<sup>15</sup> Through their collaborative leadership, Wisconsin faculty and lawmakers worked together to create policy innovations in the realms of electoral reform, administrative regulation, and social legislation. Among the most famous innovations was worker compensation legislation, passed in 1911, that created a safety net for employees who sustained job-related injuries.<sup>16</sup> These reforms were documented in Charles McCarthy’s 1912 book *The Wisconsin Idea*, in which Theodore Roosevelt stated, “It is no easy matter to give the public their proper control over corporations and big business, at yet to prevent abuse of that control. Wisconsin has achieved a really remarkable success along each and every one of those lines of difficult endeavor.”<sup>17</sup>

During the Progressive Era, many Wisconsin social scientists, including economists Richard Ely and John Commons, continued to articulate their social reform efforts as part of a God-inspired project.<sup>18</sup> Both leaders were part of an emerging movement of scientists across the nation that sought to fuse science and morality as a means to support democratic life. A central goal of these “scientific democrats” was to extend the material and spiritual rewards to groups that were historically excluded from these benefits.<sup>19</sup> Charles Van Hise animated this spirit of benevolence in referencing the New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the purpose of the Wisconsin Idea. Van Hise declared, “The purpose is the Wisconsin reply to the man who said to Jesus nearly 2000 years ago, ‘Who is my neighbor?’”<sup>20</sup>

As this era progressed, several factors—namely rising secularism and the academic revolution—shifted the Wisconsin Idea narrative from one of scripture-informed relational ideals to one of economic progress. States made provisions to prevent sectarian instruction,<sup>21</sup> and American higher education was moving from promoting discipline and piety to practical instruction.<sup>22</sup> The trend toward secularization ensued as the Civil War weakened the social influence of theological doctrine in promoting a moral

order.<sup>23</sup> Classical views about the moral purposes of higher education began to erode.<sup>24</sup>

Another important influence was the academic revolution, which refers to the growth of higher education from the early to mid-twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> During this period, UW was one of approximately twenty-five universities in the country that was fully committed to research as an institutional goal. These early research institutions set the pattern for the development of a sector that made the institutions more specialized, fragmented, and focused on the individual scholar.<sup>26</sup> Such institutions simultaneously pursued liberal culture, modern science, disinterested learning, and practical knowledge, and offered bachelor of arts degrees through professional and doctoral degrees.<sup>27</sup> The splintering of disciplines that took place during this period created distance between scholars across fields and between the academy and the broader public. The social bonds uniting faculty and local community leaders were eroding as institutional leaders and scholars began to frame their responsibilities in national terms of disciplinary advancement rather than local terms of community responsiveness.<sup>28</sup>

UW was particularly successful in reconciling these trends as it gained fame for its national leadership in the extension movement. On a national level, agricultural extension was formalized by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. This act established the USDA's partnership with land-grant universities to apply research and provide education in agriculture.<sup>29</sup> Wisconsin launched extension programs as early as 1892, and its scope went beyond agricultural programs. By 1906, the university was the first to establish a full-scale extension department offering a variety of institutes and opportunities for adult study. In 1910, UW was the only land-grant institution in the nation to offer engineering extension.<sup>30</sup> The institution was also a leader in the Social Center Movement. The University Extension's Bureau of Social and Civic Center Development played an important role in promoting citizen involvement in self-governance.<sup>31</sup> By 1915, the department of extension had a budget that was nearly double that of those in peer states.<sup>32</sup> Economic benefits to the state were evident as well. Through its agricultural extension program, Wisconsin's agricultural economy shifted from being a declining wheat-growing state to a preeminent dairy state.<sup>33</sup>

The institution's robust commitment to extension embodied Charles Van Hise's statement in 1905: "I shall never rest content until the beneficent influences of the university reach into every home in the commonwealth,

and the boundaries of our campus are coextensive with the boundaries of the state.” The phrase would later be edited to read simply, “The boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state.”<sup>34</sup>

## The Wisconsin Idea into the Mid-Twentieth Century

The Wisconsin Idea survived the demise of the Progressive Movement, which dwindled by World War I. While the political tide turned, Wisconsin policy innovations soon found themselves in a national spotlight during the depression of the 1930s. The work of Wisconsin reformers greatly influenced President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation, as significant sections of this legislation drafted by Wisconsin professors Edwin Witte and John Commons. The influence of these reformers would be felt into the midcentury as national programs such as the New Frontier (John F. Kennedy) and Great Society (Lyndon Johnson) had elements of Wisconsin policy innovations.<sup>35</sup>

After World War II, the Wisconsin Idea story evolved to become more of a story about UW rather than about the state’s early commitment to democratic engagement and overall civic life. In particular, the Wisconsin Idea narrative was situated within UW’s rapidly expanding depth and breadth of service to the state. Between 1945 and 1970 returning veterans and expanding access for women and minorities increased government financial aid and baby boomer matriculation.<sup>36</sup> Federal and state support for higher education reached new heights,<sup>37</sup> and graduate programs expanded and colleges found themselves in a “seller’s market.”<sup>38</sup> By the late 1940s, several UW alumni magazine articles, Board of Regents reports, and media pieces documented the dramatically expanding reach of the university. Child development programs, the Wisconsin Geological and History Survey, Wisconsin Hygiene lab, Wisconsin General Hospital, Bureau of Business Research, UW libraries, 4-H, WHA radio station, vocational rehabilitation, polio short courses for nurses, legal work on farm property law, agricultural extension, and suburban extension centers supporting veterans education were among the many initiatives touted as important Wisconsin Idea contributions.<sup>39</sup>

A notable shift during the postwar era is that the Wisconsin Idea was increasingly articulated as a one-way contribution of disseminating

knowledge to the public, rather than as an institution that directly engaged citizens in addressing important problems. Accentuating this view, Frank Holt, director of the UW Department of Public Service, in 1947 explained, “To see that the new knowledge acquired through research finds a place in the lives of the people is a primary function of the University of Wisconsin.”<sup>40</sup> Newspaper clippings of the day largely framed the Wisconsin Idea as a service function that was largely separated from teaching and research.<sup>41</sup> One *Milwaukee Journal* piece suggested that the relationship was largely seen as one-way by Wisconsin citizens, and turned to Chancellor E. B. Fred (1945–1958) to understand the reciprocal nature of the Wisconsin Idea. Fred explained that the university attracted talent from Wisconsin high school students who would then apply their newly acquired knowledge to improve their communities back home.<sup>42</sup> Such a framing of the Wisconsin Idea emphasized the human capital function of higher education—the development of the expert who could pour out knowledge back into the community through the training of university graduates. This differed from early twentieth-century accounts that accentuated deep relationships among faculty and citizens toward the ends of self-governance and democratic ideals.<sup>43</sup>

In summary, after surviving the demise of Progressivism, the Wisconsin Idea through the mid-twentieth century mirrored much of higher education’s post-World War II “Golden Age.” It was a period of expansion and confidence in American research universities.<sup>44</sup> During this era, UW, like other research universities of the period, was seen as a vitally important entity that contributed to society in important ways.<sup>45</sup> These contributions were increasingly seen as services that were largely unidirectional, and UW leaders touted these contributions through the unique saga of the Wisconsin Idea.

### Age of Discontent and Reform: Fracturing Views of the Wisconsin Idea

Into the last half of the twentieth century, the relationship between states and their flagship research universities became more contentious due to political, economic, and social changes of the era. Specifically, in the 1970s and 1980s, fallout from the 1960s campus riots coincided with soaring inflation, high unemployment, oil crises, wage and price controls, and corporate downsizing.<sup>46</sup> During this period, colleges and universities had increasing difficulty in explaining themselves to external audiences and

increasingly became viewed as bloated, out of touch, and drifting in character and mission.<sup>47</sup> As governor of California, Ronald Reagan responded to these new cultural conditions, offering an alternative vision of higher education that was focused solely on preparing students for jobs. Higher education soon became widely viewed as a private good rather than a public good.<sup>48</sup>

UW was not immune from public discontent and shifting views of higher education, and with it, the tenor of the Wisconsin Idea began to shift. A 1968 article in *Newsweek* asked, “How Good Is the Megaversity?” One junior attending UW declared, “I characterize this university as a service station. You drive in, plug in and drive out. The high-octane fuel education keeps you running as part of the great social machine. The university trains but it doesn’t educate. It turns out people who never ask why.”<sup>49</sup> Such a comment signaled a significant departure from Wisconsin Idea origins. While Ely, Commons, and other UW academicians explicitly focused on “why” questions in the early twentieth century,<sup>50</sup> the modern UW had become more technocratic in its underlying purposes.

Consonant with these shifts, Wisconsin initiated governing reforms that would have an impact on how Wisconsin citizens saw its relationship to UW-Madison, its flagship campus. In 1965, UW-Madison outreach staff positions and budgetary support were spun off into a new institution called UW-Extension. This independent entity shared faculty and staff appointments with UW-Madison and other UW campuses throughout the state. A consequence of this change is that UW-Madison lost its identity as the chief institution addressing state issues.<sup>51</sup> It also sent the message to UW-Madison faculty that service and outreach were largely separate from their primary work as scholars.<sup>52</sup> By the late 1970s, there was increasing criticism that the state-university relationship had cooled and that UW faculty were rarely consulted in advising state legislators or were actively involved in service to the state.<sup>53</sup> One explanation for the disconnection was that the legislature became more professionalized, and thus less help was needed from faculty than in the early years of the state.<sup>54</sup>

Despite these structural, cultural, and political changes, UW leaders continued to point to its commitment to its service to the state and broader society, especially in the realm of continuing education. During the university’s 125th anniversary event on February 5, 1975, a report called “A Restatement of the Wisconsin Idea by a Faculty Committee” discussed the need to create more certificate programs, weekend and night courses, and extended degrees to meet public needs consistent with the Wisconsin

Idea.<sup>55</sup> This framing of the Wisconsin Idea fit well with the emerging trend among higher education leaders to position their universities in ways that were more market-oriented and consumer-driven.

This repositioning of UW was also in line with a growing group of management gurus who were sounding the alarms about the need for college and university leaders to be strategic in their management and operations.<sup>56</sup> Accentuating this viewpoint, George Keller, a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, gave a keynote address at a 1986 conference sponsored by the Wisconsin Idea Commission. Keller was the author of the influential book *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*.<sup>57</sup> He told the audience that the Wisconsin Idea was hatched out of a need for money and that by creating a culturally palatable story of the university, leaders could sell it to legislators and the broader public: “The Wisconsin Idea is one of the great public relations coups of American higher education.” To effectively weather the storms of the day, Keller advised UW leaders to focus its work on education and economic development as the two original charters of the Morrill Act. He told the audience, “Be careful about spreading yourselves too thin and of confusing knowledge transfer with fixing all the ills of society. You are educators, not saviors.” Keller added, “For some professors, service to the less educated working people does not come easily, indeed it is often seen as a distraction from ‘real’ scholarly pursuits.”<sup>58</sup>

Keller’s comments were compatible with the dominant belief of the era that knowledge production in itself was the research university’s primary contribution to society. Due to the success of technological innovations of mid-twentieth century (e.g., war technology, putting a man on the moon, etc.), there was widespread belief that scientific knowledge could “save” society.<sup>59</sup> Drawing on this public confidence and goodwill, science became largely accountable to itself in the form of peer review and faculty-led competitive grant competitions. In this new context, institutional cultures were incentivized to pursue knowledge rather than to solve problems.<sup>60</sup>

The faith in new knowledge discovery and technological breakthroughs in the natural and biological sciences gave scholars confidence that similar breakthroughs could be realized in social domains, often referred to as the “technological fix.”<sup>61</sup> This idea posited that social science experts could cure social ills in much the same way that biological scientists cured physical ills (vaccinations, etc.). This notion of the “technological fix” is found within the Wisconsin Idea story as illustrated by an address given by UW chancellor Donna Shalala (1988–93) at the University of Illinois in 1989.

Her lecture, titled “Mandate for a New Century: Reshaping the Research University’s Role in Social Policy,” compared UW medical breakthroughs such as curing juvenile rickets to the present-day task of social science researchers solving complex social problems.<sup>62</sup> Shalala remarked that tape recorders and shoe leather would be primary agents of discovery to address these problems and invoked the legacy of Wisconsin’s early progressives in advocating for value-free pursuit of social science solutions. Shalala continued, “The idea of a disinterested technocratic elite, as it were—the state’s best and brightest working for all—was so appealing that even after ‘Fighting Bob’ LaFollette’s Progressives became history, the tradition that universities could improve the quality of life persisted.”

Shalala introduced the Wisconsin Idea, framed as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge for public benefit, in her lecture as an exchange of state funding for university knowledge and services for state benefit: “The Wisconsin Idea has come to mean an implicit cooperation and alliance between the state university and the citizens of the state. In recognition of support from state taxpayers, the university is imbued with a sense of public service—its faculty and staff are engaged in an extraordinary number of activity and programs that return benefits to the state’s citizens.”<sup>63</sup> Shalala outlined the terms of the exchange, pointing to the division of labor in fulfilling the Wisconsin Idea mandate: “In return for the government’s willingness to provide funds in the long-term sustained way that is necessary we must provide concise pragmatic, useful strategies. And policymakers must be willing to listen to our findings when we report them and to act on those findings—just as they would employ a vaccine to fight an epidemic or plant a new grain to fight a famine.”<sup>64</sup>

Overall, a distinguishing feature of the Wisconsin Idea during the era is that it became more contractual in tone and language, and faculty became divided in their roles as citizens and technical experts. In a 1981 article appearing in the alumni magazine *On Wisconsin*, Stephen Born and Harold Jordahl Jr. promoted a corporate model for the Wisconsin Idea that reflected a clear dividing line between faculty experts and the broader citizenry. They discussed the educational system as being made up of “suppliers” and “users,” whereby faculty were the basic nodes on the supply side and government officials and citizens were the primary users. Congruent with Shalala’s framing of the Wisconsin Idea, the authors suggested that “the communication between governmental users and University suppliers of knowledge will need continuing attention in future years.”<sup>65</sup>

Near the dawn of the new millennium, many higher leaders took notice of the growing public discontent of the modern research university and its growing disengagement from civic life. In 1996, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities was established to take stock of public research universities at the close of the century. In their third report, “Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution,” the commission declared that a key challenge for these institutions is the growing public perception that they are out of touch and unresponsive to the needs of society. To address these concerns, leaders advocated for creation of “engaged” institutions that “have redesigned their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however community may be defined.”<sup>66</sup>

UW chancellor David Ward (1993–2000) was a signatory on the Kellogg Commission report and led calls to refresh the Wisconsin Idea for the new millennium. Ward’s twenty-first-century vision for the Wisconsin Idea—in collaboration with UW provost John Wiley—focused on interdisciplinary, cross-sector collaborations that were increasingly global in scope.<sup>67</sup> This framing of the Wisconsin Idea was also compatible with an emerging focus among federal agencies to fund research that demonstrated broader impacts to society.<sup>68</sup> Reflecting the global footprint of UW outreach, one publication highlighted the UW Land Tenure Center’s efforts in “taking the Wisconsin Idea to Albania.”<sup>69</sup> With increasing globalization, an international framing of the Wisconsin Idea placed the university in a strategically advantageous position. Partnerships around the world could yield many benefits to the institution and the state, an important one being revenue generation for the university.<sup>70</sup> Charles Van Hise’s “boundaries of the university” were no longer the boundaries of the state but the boundaries of the world.

At the close of the twentieth century, the Wisconsin Idea narrative was not just changing at the institutional level. It was also occurring at the state policy level. In the 1990s, Wisconsin conservatives invoked the Wisconsin Idea in ways that promoted their policy solutions that differed ideologically from the Progressive Era. Michael Joyce, chair of the conservative Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee, was a particularly influential figure who leveraged the Wisconsin Idea to promote conservative ideals. In a 1992 op-ed, Joyce described a privately funded initiative to promote school choice in Milwaukee, suggesting that moving school decisions away from state bureaucrats to families was the best of the Wisconsin’s Progressive tradition.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, his full-length article in *Wisconsin Interest* argued that

Progressives like John Bascom were well meaning, but that their efforts to place power in the states rather than citizens and voluntary associations was a failed experiment. He made the case that the corporate corruption that the Wisconsin Idea reformers sought to dismantle was merely transferred to public unions, bureaucrats, and state politicians.<sup>72</sup>

During this era, Republican governor Tommy Thompson also played an important role in shifting the Wisconsin Idea narrative. Thompson served as governor for fourteen years, between 1987 and 2001. In 1997, Thompson convened the Blue Ribbon Commission on 21st Century Jobs, which linked the Wisconsin Idea to state workforce development. The report, titled “The New Wisconsin Idea: The Innovative Learning State,” framed the Wisconsin Idea through the lens of innovation and skill building. The end goal of the commission was to help Wisconsinites compete in the twenty-first-century workforce.<sup>73</sup> Nearly two decades later, a book titled *The New Wisconsin Idea: Reinventing Public Compassion for the 21st Century* documented Thompson’s welfare reform efforts in the early 1990s.<sup>74</sup> These narratives of the Wisconsin Idea would become the foundation of higher education politics in Wisconsin that emerged by the second decade of the twenty-first century.

### Wisconsin Idea and the Scott Walker Era

The structural, political, and cultural changes of the twentieth century paved a way for contemporary politics and policy proposals in Wisconsin from 2010 to the present. Wisconsin citizens, like those in other states, were beginning to lose patience with large American institutions of all types. The national project to make colleges and universities more engaged with the public was slow, and land-grant universities were among the unhurried of all institutions to adopt these practices.<sup>75</sup> A task force of state university presidents convened by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities wrote, “While the idea of public engagement is frequently embraced by college and university presidents, there is considerable evidence that deep engagement is rare—there is more smoke than fire, more rhetoric than reality.”<sup>76</sup>

Into the new century, public discontent with higher education continued and mirrored the growing skepticism of a myriad of institutions such as public schools, unions, churches, and medical and legal professions. In general, a belief took hold that leaders of institutions tend to serve their own interests rather than serve the public.<sup>77</sup> The country grew increasingly

politically polarized,<sup>78</sup> and in many cases higher education became a wedge issue accentuating these divisions.<sup>79</sup> The tipping point of disconnection came with the Great Recession of 2008, which was the worst economic recession since World War II.<sup>80</sup> The recession disproportionately impacted citizens without a college degree, further dividing people around educational attainment.<sup>81</sup> These conditions set the stage for the election of Wisconsin governor Scott Walker.

In her book, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Katherine Cramer concluded that Walker won the 2010 election, in part, by fueling resentment in rural communities about state employees—including UW faculty—who were viewed as lazy, overpaid, and underserving of their benefits. These communities held the view that state taxes they paid were not coming back to rural communities, but staying in the state's two largest urban centers—Madison and Milwaukee—for wasteful projects.<sup>82</sup> This view of UW elitism resonated with David Blaska, conservative columnist for *Isthmus*, who issued one of the most lethal critiques of the Wisconsin Idea: “The narrative behind the Wisconsin Idea, is that the experts would instruct their lessors, especially legislators popularly elected by the rabble, to scrape the manure off their boots before they enter the State Capitol.”<sup>83</sup>

The weight of these perspectives provided fuel for Governor Walker to propose significant changes to the UW system. Early in his governorship, Walker and UW-Madison chancellor Carolyn “Biddy” Martin proposed to separate the university from the UW system, giving it tuition-setting authority under its own Board of Trustees. The New Badger Partnership was promoted as reducing the burden on the state budget and maintaining UW-Madison's world-class university status. Martin ensured critics that the Wisconsin Idea would be safe under the new arrangement: “If anything, we are more committed than ever to the Wisconsin Idea, to using our international stature and quality to serve citizens at the local level.”<sup>84</sup> The proposal died due to strong opposition from other UW System schools, and Martin left the university to lead Amherst College.<sup>85</sup>

The Wisconsin Idea would again be stirred up in 2015, as Governor Walker advanced a twofold proposal to create a public authority for the UW System and cut \$300 million from its budget.<sup>86</sup> But the lightning rod issue that received the most attention was Governor Walker's budget amendment that struck historic language evoking the Wisconsin Idea from the UW mission statement. In the context of a budget bill, Governor Walker and his staff deleted the phrase “Basic to every purpose of the system is the search

for truth.” The governor instead added the phrase “The mission of the system is to ... meet the state’s workforce needs.” The revision brought a flurry of press condemning the change, and the governor insisted that the incident was the result of a drafting error.<sup>87</sup> Throughout the Walker era, articles appeared in the *New York Times* and other national newspapers calling for bipartisan agreement in Wisconsin, saving the humanities, and restoring the state’s progressive heritage.<sup>88</sup>

Today, the Wisconsin Idea continues to be molded in ways that mirror the changing political landscape of Wisconsin. In 2018, former state superintendent of public instruction and democratic candidate Tony Evers was elected governor. In beginning his 2019 State of the State address, Governor Evers called for a renewed commitment to the Wisconsin Idea in guiding democratic decision making.<sup>89</sup> As the state remains politically divided and support for the UW remains mixed, only time will tell how the next chapter of the Wisconsin Idea will unfold.

### The Wisconsin Idea: Civic Inspiration or Civic Disillusionment?

My analysis of the Wisconsin Idea narrative reveals a complicated story that renders it a source of both civic inspiration and civic disillusionment. Its inspiration lies in the notion that the early underpinnings of the Wisconsin Idea promoted wholeness in the academy in a way that connected UW faculty to a larger story about serving humanity. Driven by their technological enthusiasm, humanitarianism, and Protestant moralism, these “scientific democrats” carried out their commitments in areas where cultural institutions and the market failed to bring wholeness to communities.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Bascom and his protégés lived out “whole” lives in committing to these ideals as they viewed the university as being connected to larger redemptive purposes, and made sense of their own lives in relationship to these purposes. While this era was in no way perfect as it relates to ongoing injustices in American society, the Wisconsin Idea stands out as a source of civic inspiration in remedying the current state of U.S. higher education.

Meanwhile, the source of civic disillusionment lies in the fact that this “wholeness” and deep connection with civic life was not sustainable with the emerging form of the modern university. This is evident in the shifting narrative of the Wisconsin Idea through the present era. Due to disciplinary specialization, fragmentation, secularization, and other societal forces, UW faculty became separated from their convictions and scholarly practices

that fueled their larger purposes in the academy. By the mid-twentieth century, technological progress and the notion of the “technological fix” had the effect of disempowering communities and removing faculty from deeply engaging fellow citizens on complex human problems.<sup>91</sup> With the dissolve of this relational quality of the Wisconsin Idea, the vision became undistinguishable from peer universities that also focused on disinterested knowledge production and offered an array of outreach services for its citizens. As Wendell Berry suggested in his essay “The Loss of the University,” the university had become a creator of “parts of things” not whole things.<sup>92</sup> Berry explained, “Part of the problem in universities now (or part of the cause of the problem) is the loss of concern for the thing made and, back of that, I think, the loss of agreement on what the thing is that is being made. The thing being made in the university is humanity.”<sup>93</sup>

### A Wisconsin Idea for Tomorrow? Considering Moral Foundations a Good Society

Can the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea be reignited as a source of wholeness and civic inspiration? While the Wisconsin Idea has drifted far from Bascom’s original vision, the concept provides hope for current leaders of higher education in our age of disconnection, division, and polarization. During Bascom’s era, the nation was struggling to free itself from the vestiges of slavery and other injustices, while entire groups of people were excluded from the public dialogue. But, these ongoing struggles were the very things that gave Bascom’s vision power. They lit a way forward to redeeming a society that was marred by corruption and discrimination.<sup>94</sup> Through this restorative framework, UW’s “scientific democrats” labored with fellow citizens to build a good society and saw themselves within a greater story of advancing humankind—a story that brought profound purpose and wholeness to their work in the academy.

While the context today is vastly different from Bascom’s, a hunger persists across political lines to elevate a larger moral vision for higher education that builds wholeness and counters present division and discontent. In a 2015 op-ed piece, ambassador and former Wisconsin speaker of the house Tom Loftus lamented Scott Walker’s dismantling of Bascom’s theologically inspired vision in Wisconsin higher education. Loftus, one of the state’s most prominent Democrats, referred to the Wisconsin Idea as “a

poem of faith in mankind.<sup>95</sup> A decade earlier, Michael Joyce, a prominent Milwaukee attorney and trustee with the conservative Bradley Foundation, discussed the importance of sustaining a moral vision for education.<sup>96</sup> Former UW chancellor Rebecca Blank's scholarship in the field of economics conceptualizes ideas of civic life and justice through historic theological traditions, suggesting that campus leaders are able to align multiple dimensions of their life with moral foundations.<sup>97</sup> Recent research has shown that our most civically engaged students—and most philanthropically motivated alumni—are those individuals who intersect moral formation with broad civic commitments.<sup>98</sup>

Yet while these deep longings persist, a challenge remains that the modern university has few resources to construct meaningful dialogue about what it means to live a good life or create a good society. Today, academic leaders of moral inquiry projects largely rely on social objectives to guide their work in lieu of broader ethical standards, which makes the notion about “doing good” susceptible to changing social norms or vulnerable to those in power.<sup>99</sup> James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky point out this quandary in their book *Science and the Good*: “This leaves the new moral science in a place where it is incapable of either critiquing the distortions of power and privilege or affirming higher moral ends that draw us to the possibilities of greater human flourishing—for everyone, but especially those without power and privilege.”<sup>100</sup> The authors force a difficult question as one imagines reconstructing moral foundations in American higher education and the broader society: “By whose standards do we understand what is good?”

### Human Flourishing as a Foundation for Building Wholeness amid Disconnection

In today's polarizing society, reconstructing a shared moral framework to guide the academy is an unlikely solution to remedy our disconnection and satisfy our deep longings to “do good” in the world. A more plausible possibility is introducing new (old) framings of human purpose and relationships that may reignite the earlier spirit of the Wisconsin Idea. Specifically, Hunter and Nedelisky's references to the “possibilities of greater human flourishing” signal a reframing of early purposes of higher education that would have resonated with Bascom and the early scientific democrats and may also give hope to present-day academicians. Educational philosophers define the concept of flourishing as one that emphasizes the whole life,

focuses on human potential, and is viewed as intrinsically worthwhile.<sup>101</sup> Flourishing conceives of human relationships as covenantal, emphasizing the “commitment to each to give for the flourishing of the other, generously, not *quid pro quo*.”<sup>102</sup> Evidence abounds that Bascom and his protégés brought to bear their full identities as they sought to promote a flourishing democracy in the state of Wisconsin.

If the concept of human flourishing is to be considered a serious project within the civic reconstruction of higher education, it requires a profound change in the culture and mindset of the modern university. In his recent book, *To Flourish or Destruct*, Christian Smith argues that mindsets of reductionism and tribalism dominate academic culture today. These mindsets are anchored within dominant anthropologies that view humans largely as self-determining, group-interest-seeking, or norm-following in their motivation and behavior. Countering these dominant perspectives, the notion of human flourishing is centered in the alternative ontology of personhood, which Smith describes as “living as a self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the non-personal world.”<sup>103</sup> From this ontological vantage point, humans are oriented to an ultimate set of human goods for which all human beings have deep longings. These ultimate goods include social cohesion and love: loving others and being loved by others.<sup>104</sup> If human flourishing is taken seriously as a core purpose of higher education, can the modern academy be reformed in a way that orients us toward these ultimate ends?

In conclusion, the story of the Wisconsin Idea is a complex one that helps us see the possibilities and challenges of creating wholeness in the academy and the broader society. By examining its history, one can see hope for civic reconstruction of higher education and the complex job that lies ahead. The notion of human flourishing offers promise for rekindling the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea as it values wholeness over bifurcation, love over indifference, and hope over fear. These dispositions and underlying values have the power to renew a deeper sense of purpose for the university and, with it, a means to create whole lives in the academy and our world.

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## NOTES

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