

**“Trying to plan for the future
without a sense of the past
is like trying to plant
cut flowers”**

--Daniel Boorstin, historian and
Librarian of Congress

The Wisconsin Idea: The Vision that Made Wisconsin Famous

Introduction

To the practitioners who comprise UW-Madison’s Community Partnerships and Outreach (CPO) Staff Network, the Wisconsin Idea is at the heart of their day-to-day work with communities in Wisconsin and beyond. But the original meaning of the Wisconsin Idea has faded over time, replaced by a generic public service mandate. [\(1\) “The Boundaries of the University are the Boundaries of the State”](#)

*The “Year of the Wisconsin Idea” offers us an opportunity to reflect on how the Wisconsin Idea guides our practice. We chose to explore the history of the emergence of the Wisconsin Idea in an attempt to renew and clarify our vision for **why** and **how** we engage with the public to address pressing issues.*

It turns out that the history of the University’s engagement with the State offers much more relevant guidance than we would have imagined. The values that drove the founders of the WI Idea—truth, self-governance, egalitarianism, integrity, trust and social capital—are the same values that represent effective, democratic partnerships today. It’s evident in our practice, and now it’s evident in our history as well, thanks to the work of Gwen Drury, Ph.D. student in Educational Policy and Leadership Analysis at UW-Madison. The rich history she details here brings us closer to our best practices—equitable, reciprocal engagement in which knowledge is co-created by the University and communities working together on issues that matter to all of us.

--Katherine Loving

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Summary

The Wisconsin Idea began as the principle that knowledge and education should be used to ensure that the people of the State could retain and exercise power in their government and economy. This vision, shared by the State and the University, led to Wisconsin’s rise to fame in the early 1900s.

The Wisconsin Idea emerged from a set of influential personal relationships based on trust and shared values. Charles Van Hise and Bob La Follette met at UW as undergraduates and were deeply influenced by President John Bascom's belief that the University's service to the State was a moral obligation. Frederick Jackson Turner, also influenced by Bascom as an undergraduate, later became the teacher of Charles McCarthy, who wrote the 1912 book *The Wisconsin Idea* that gave the vision a name.

As these founders of the Wisconsin Idea went on to gain positional power in the State and University, they recognized and were motivated by the immediate threats to the democracy and economy at the time—the diminishment of resources inside the State and the consolidation of wealth outside of it. At that key moment in history, they remained committed to the vision, and employed the necessary resources to realize it.

Early examples of the University working with citizens to address public issues included providing technical assistance to the dairy industry to increase production and ensure fairness in commerce, University experts working with the Legislative Reference Library to share knowledge with State government, and creating University Extension to share practical knowledge and education around the state.

The transfer of knowledge and information was valuable as a tool that citizens could use to make their own decisions and govern themselves most effectively. But information alone was not enough; the Wisconsin Idea was built on the notion that broad and deep social connections make democracy stronger. Other social movements and universities approached their service mission as “noblesse oblige,” while at Wisconsin, the guiding vision was expressly egalitarian and democratic.

The history of the emergence of the Wisconsin Idea offers a set of values—self-governance, integrity, egalitarianism, truth and interpersonal trust—that can guide the University's contemporary approach to engaging with public issues.

Essay

The Wisconsin Idea: The Vision that Made Wisconsin Famous

by Gwen Drury

Because of the success of the Wisconsin Idea, faculty, staff and students at the UW-Madison are now drawn to Wisconsin from all over the world. Many of us have worked at other universities whose *missions* are remarkably similar; our job descriptions may even be similar to other jobs we've held. Does that mean we now do our work differently, having moved to Wisconsin? Why? How?

Conversely, many schoolchildren all over the state of Wisconsin have been taught the history of the Wisconsin Idea for generations. They are proud of the legacy of the Wisconsin Idea, enough that they now expect the entire University of Wisconsin System of higher education to hold the Wisconsin Idea as central to their work.

Everyone who claims the Wisconsin Idea as a touchstone of their purpose should take the "Year of the Wisconsin Idea" as an opportunity to delve into its history, and figure out how their work – and the way in which they do it - helps us all realize the vision that made Wisconsin famous.

The history of the University of Wisconsin and its relationship to the State is one of the most famous in the world of higher education; hundreds of books and scholarly articles have been written about this history. The story that follows summarizes the origins and emergence of the Wisconsin Idea.

WISCONSIN IS DIFFERENT, BUT WHY AND HOW?

No one could have predicted that we would explode into the limelight like we did in the first two decades of the 20th century. Wisconsin – the State *and* its University – won nationwide celebrity status. How did a relatively new state with a small population, widely considered to be part of the "Western frontier," far from more established centers of wealth and academic culture, seemingly emerge out of nowhere to become the national leader for both governmental reform and a new form of state-sponsored research universities? [\(2\) Reputations](#) There is no doubt that what happened then set the trajectory for the State of Wisconsin to build and maintain an unparalleled reputation for forward-thinking, squeaky-clean governance, and for the University of Wisconsin to achieve renown as one of the top research universities in the world. The values of truth, self-governance, egalitarianism, integrity, and interpersonal connectedness based on trust have consistently been at the heart of our most successful endeavors.

WE KNEW WE WERE ONTO SOMETHING, YEARS BEFORE THAT SOMETHING HAD A NAME

The title of a book published in 1912 by Charles McCarthy, the head of the Legislative Reference Library, gave this phenomenon its name - the "Wisconsin Idea." [\(3\) The McCarthy Story](#) McCarthy's book, however, mainly represents a snapshot in time, focusing on Wisconsin's Legislative Session of 1911, and how it came to be. The Wisconsin Idea became far more than even that book could describe.

Historically, the emphasis in the phrase “Wisconsin Idea” would have been on the first word, rather than the second: the **Wisconsin** Idea, not the Wisconsin **Idea**. Why does it make a difference that we understand the original emphasis? Because it described what was distinctive about our approach, what differentiated us.

What we were claiming was that **how** we thought about the same issues that were being faced in nearly identical forms all across the nation was what differentiated Wisconsin’s approach, and what predicated Wisconsin’s game-changing results. “The Wisconsin Idea” could just as easily have been named “The Wisconsin Way,” but that would have made it sound like there was a recipe to be followed, and wouldn’t have expressed the fresh, experimental feel; the innovative partnerships; and the burgeoning forward motion of the moment.

THE WISCONSIN IDEA IS A VISION, NOT A MISSION

“The Wisconsin Idea” expressed not our mission, but our **vision**. It describes not *what* we do, but *why* and *in what manner*. While the University of Wisconsin shared a similar mission with other state universities, it was our vision of what successful achievement of that mission would look like and mean that differentiated us. [\(4\) Missions of State Universities](#) While our mission was not unique, our vision was. And the fact that it was a vision shared by the University and the State enabled a partnership that amplified its impact. This vision—of using knowledge and education to create a balance that would keep our citizens at the heart of their own governance and of their own economy—was like nothing that had been seen before.

HIGHER EDUCATION EVOLVES NATIONWIDE

Wisconsin was established as a state in 1848, and its University immediately thereafter, but not in a form we’d recognize today. The UW existed as a college that would have been hard to tell from one of the church-sponsored colleges existing at the time, which was true of many state “universities” of that period. Traditionally, colleges had existed to prepare a small percentage of the people for a small number of professions, like law, medicine and the clergy. The Morrill Land Grant Act, passed by Congress and signed by President Lincoln in 1862 (in the midst of the Civil War) began to change that fact by giving an incentive to the states to broaden their curriculum to include practical professions like agriculture, engineering, mining and military studies. The country was growing and these were the fields that would create the infrastructure to support that growth. Public higher education across the country would evolve due to the Morrill Act. At Wisconsin, we would begin a slightly different trajectory from our peers.

WISCONSIN RESPONDS DIFFERENTLY TO THE MORRILL ACT

While many states that already had existing state universities decided to establish whole new schools to enact the Morrill Act’s goals, (think of the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M) Wisconsin decided to incorporate the new practical education programs into its existing university. The applied and basic curricula would develop together at Wisconsin, and over the next 100 years, this broadening

combination would prove to be potent. By the 21st century, when interdisciplinarity has become so important, this decision seems like genius. In reality, it was probably just a frugal measure at the time.

The late 1800s through early 1900s was the era in which universities nationwide began the change from being “old time colleges” that were small, denominational, and focused on transmitting old traditions, to modern universities in search of new knowledge. The “service” mission also emerged across the nation at this time, in both public and private universities. Soon, however, Wisconsin’s idea of why and how to engage in a service mission would put us at the cutting edge of state universities nationwide.

[\(5\) Service](#)

TRANSFORMATIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND KEY IDEAS COME TOGETHER

In the last decades of the 1800s, several students enrolled as undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin who would later change Wisconsin, its university and the nation’s conception of what a state university can and should be. In 1874, Charles Van Hise (known as Van) and Robert La Follette (known as Bob), entered the UW as students at nearly the same time that John Bascom, a professor of both Political Economy and Rhetoric, became its new President. Frederick Jackson Turner (known as “Freddie”) entered a few years later, spending most of his college years under the presidency and influence of John Bascom, and graduating in 1884. [\(6\) The Power of Their Experiences on Campus](#) They were all deeply influenced by Bascom’s insistence that those who got a higher education made possible by the state assumed a moral obligation to use their knowledge not only for their own advancement, but for the benefit of the people of the State. [\(7\) Moral Obligation and Sledgehammer Blows](#)

Bascom’s values permeated the interdisciplinary perspective these men were developing about Wisconsin and the world. [\(8\) Van Hise on the Highest Purpose of Acquiring Knowledge](#) Van Hise’s study of the geology and natural resources of Wisconsin; combined with Turner’s study of the way in which people had interacted with those resources and with each other, as non-native settlement advanced across the continent; combined with La Follette’s interest in the law and politics, gave them a uniquely broad, shared vision. Each was also keenly aware that Wisconsin was in a precarious position within each of these domains at that moment. This volatile mix ignited a passion in all of them for the potential of education and knowledge to make the crucial difference for the people of the state of Wisconsin as the 20th century dawned.

SOCIAL CAPITAL BRINGS NEW PEOPLE INTO THE MIX

Social capital – relationship ties and trust based in shared values – clearly played a huge role in the success this small group achieved in inspiring so many other people so deeply. They also sought out and brought to campus people who shared these values. Once he was on the Wisconsin faculty, Turner persuaded the UW President to bring Economics professor Richard T. Ely to Wisconsin from Johns Hopkins. Two years later, Ely would find himself on trial before the Regents, having been accused of teaching socialism. He was exonerated, and as a result, one of the most famous statements on the importance of academic freedom ever written in the country was penned by the Regents. [\(9\) Sifting and Winnowing](#) His reputation was restored, and in 1904, Ely recruited his former Hopkins student, John R. Commons. [\(10\) John R. Commons](#)

Turner, Van Hise and La Follette shared similar values regarding the role of the University in society – essentially secularized versions of the Christian-based moral philosophy of John Bascom. Ely and Commons couched those same values in an explicitly Christian vision, more like Bascom’s. However, their religious differences did not seem to divide them, as they all shared a commitment to pursuing truth, and challenging their assumptions, for the benefit of the people of Wisconsin. Later, a Ph.D. student of Turner’s named Charles McCarthy, would share the same vision, and help to construct many of the structures that would bring the moral obligation of the Wisconsin Idea to life in dramatic fashion, and in a secular framework. [\(11\) Mentoring Relationships](#)

KEY PEOPLE ASSUME KEY POSITIONS

By the turn of the century, these men had spent many years talking with each other and developing a shared sense of what was happening in the world, and where Wisconsin fell on the continuum of development at this moment in time. Based on his notions of a predictable sequence of development that places would experience by virtue of being located along a developing frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner would become one of the most famous historians in the United States. [\(12\) Turner’s Famous Frontier Thesis](#) His thinking clearly influenced this group. [\(13\) Frederick J. Turner on Public Higher Education](#) As their individual knowledge bases grew, the sense of moral obligation to serve the people of the state that Van Hise, La Follette and Turner had absorbed from UW President John Bascom informed their world view and their relationships, affecting the culture of the University and eventually the state’s government. McCarthy explains in his book that given the demographics of Wisconsin at that time, the State’s culture provided fertile ground for this seed to grow.

The trajectories of these men’s lives put them in pivotal positions at pivotal moments in time. In 1900, La Follette rose to be Wisconsin’s Governor, then U.S. Senator in 1906. Van Hise became UW President, in 1903. [\(14\) Turner & La Follette Work to Get Van Hise as UW President](#) In 1900, Charles McCarthy became the head of the new Legislative Reference Library, establishing a direct and formal link between the expertise of the University and the Legislators of the State. [\(15\) Charles McCarthy and the Legislative Reference Library](#)

These men formed the core group that initiated the rapid rise of the Wisconsin Idea. All of the alignments between relationships and ideas that they had put into place over the years allowed them to tip the balance, and change the status quo in the State. Wisconsin’s reputation finally flipped from years of being known as one of the most corrupt states [[\(16\) The Progressive Movement, Wisconsin Farmers and the Railroads](#)] to being known as one of the most principled, honest and open. The values of truth, self-governance, egalitarianism, integrity, and interpersonal connectedness based on trust really took hold.

ENSURING THAT DEMOCRACY DOES NOT SLIP OUT OF THE HANDS OF THE PEOPLE

These men did not take democracy for granted. They were just on the verge of being teenagers when the Civil War was fought. Surely they were conscious that Camp Randall, in nearby Madison, was an active military training camp for Union soldiers, and a prison for captured Confederate soldiers. We know that they were also conscious of the fact that other countries’ attempts at establishing democracy

had slipped into different forms of governance instead. For example, the King of France had been toppled, but an Emperor had emerged in his place.

In the first issue of *La Follette's Weekly*, published January 9, 1909, Bob La Follette (a U.S. Senator since 1906) wrote, "The battle is just on. It is young yet. It will be the longest and hardest ever fought for Democracy. In other lands, the people have lost. Here we shall win. It is a glorious privilege to live in this time, and to have a free hand in this fight for government by the people." [\(17\) Bob La Follette on the Goals of the Progressive Movement](#)

If the concept of an "ecosystem" had been developed back then, saying that they were trying to create an ecosystem to support democracy would have been more than an apt metaphor, it would nearly be a literal description. [\(18\) A Self-Organizing System for Self-Governance and Democracy](#) They wanted to make sure that conditions in the state – physical, social and legal - did not allow a shift of power away from the broadest number of citizens and toward a limited group of powerful, monied people.

A research study published in 2011 can help illustrate what we mean by an ecosystem balanced to favor one sort of functioning versus another. A UW professor of Limnology (the study of lakes as ecosystems) conducted a study [[\(19\) Predators and Balance](#)] that in many ways could serve as a metaphor for what the founders of the Wisconsin Idea were trying to do: flip the political, cultural and physical ecosystem in Wisconsin to one in which all citizens would be prepared, and feel confident in their ability, to fully participate in a true democracy and a prosperous economy. Looking around the nation, they saw that the "big fish" were not only eating up the "little fish," but they were creating a fearful culture, full of secrecy, back-room deals, and political patronage that was changing the entire ecosystem so that the little fish could no longer fairly compete and thrive in their environment. [\(20\) Distinguishing Between Self-Governance and Democracy](#), [\(21\) Pioneers as an Invasive Species?](#)

"When they call the role in the
Senate, the Senators do not
know whether to answer
present or not guilty"

--- Theodore Roosevelt

[\(22\) Theodore Roosevelt's Introduction to Charles McCarthy's book](#)

Crony-ism and secret deals had led to corruption nationwide in the decades after the Civil War. Political bosses controlled party politics, while trusts and monopolies were concentrating their power and emerging as what Charles McCarthy would call "predatory wealth." To protect the ability of the little fish to compete economically and to fully participate in self-governance, the overall ecosystem of Wisconsin needed to be balanced against invasion and domination by predators with names like Rockefeller and Carnegie. [\(23\) Plutocrats and Party Bosses](#)

A VISION THAT KNOWLEDGE IS POWER AND BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE IN A DEMOCRACY

[\(24\) Van Hise on the Place of a University in a Democracy](#)

The “Wisconsin Idea” can be described as the vision of the many roles that education and knowledge can play in helping the people of the State to keep their ecosystem balanced for true self-governing democracy, and robust participation in the creation of prosperity. [\(25\) Service of Light and Power to All the State](#) The means of realizing that vision have changed over the years, depending on the needs of the State, often overlapping as different layers of initiatives happening at the same time. Here are some examples of early initiatives.

In the late 1800s, the dairy industry began to ask for help from the University, and some of the early successes demonstrated that such partnerships could be successful. With the help of the UW, the State of Wisconsin gradually flipped from being a declining wheat-growing state to becoming the pre-eminent dairy state in the nation. (This was the sort of economic shift that Turner had predicted in his Frontier Thesis, and certainly had a lot to do with the physical ecosystem of the State.)

In the early 1900s, another example of the vision in action was that of partnerships between university experts and the government. [\(26\) University Experts](#) At that time, not that many experts had yet been educated in many of the fields in which the state needed expert advice. Wisconsin, starting with Bob La Follette, tapped directly into its reservoir of expertise at the University to fill the gap. Both La Follette’s relationships and the geographic proximity of the seat of government to the University made that decision an easy and logical one. La Follette went so far as to host “Saturday Lunches” at the Governor’s mansion (then, closer to campus), to which he would regularly invite professors from the University to discuss the issues of the day.

In 1906/07, a truly signature means of realizing the vision of the Wisconsin Idea as tool for balancing the ecosystem to support democracy was created: an official Division of University Extension. This effort involved extending the opportunities for education, the sharing of information, and the development of expertise in the population around the state. Like most other state universities, we had already sponsored a modest number of outreach efforts like Institutes, Short Courses for farmers in the winter, and professors traveling the state and giving lectures. But with our official Division of University Extension, Wisconsin would leap into the vanguard.

In the early 1900s, Charles McCarthy learned that there was a growing demand for Correspondence Courses, and that it was being filled by random and out-of-state entities set up for this purpose. McCarthy convinced Van Hise that this meant that the citizens wanted more information and education. After some hesitation, Van Hise agreed with McCarthy about Correspondence Courses, and since he felt that the University could deliver better, more accurate, cutting edge information, he thought the citizens would be better served by reliable outreach courses originating with the University. Many other state universities were doing Extension-like activities, but in 1906, UW was the first to create an official Division of University Extension; in 1907, the Legislature officially funded it. In 1912, the first official position as a County Extension Agent was started in Oneida County. By 1915, UW’s Extension had a budget that was roughly double that of the next closest-sized Extension in any other state.

In 1914, the Federal government founded “Cooperative Extension” as part of the USDA, through the Smith-Lever Act. Created to serve the rural populations of the U.S., Cooperative Extension created an official, cooperative link between state universities, counties, and the U.S. government. [\(27\) Clarifying Some Confusion about Extension](#)

Today, Wisconsin’s umbrella title for University Extension and Cooperative Extension is “UW-Extension,” and it is still going strong. However, some of the programs that were established in its earliest days, and which seem especially suited to supporting an ecosystem balanced to support democracy, fell by the wayside as the Progressive movement waned following World War I. Many people aren’t even aware that these programs ever existed, but they are surprisingly relevant for today’s challenges. [\(28\) More Suited for the 21st Century than the 20th?](#)

GOOD INFORMATION IS NOT ENOUGH: CITIZENS NEED SOCIAL CAPITAL

[\(29\) Early Definition of Social Capital](#)

The vision of the Wisconsin Idea wasn’t just that if experts developed and provided the most accurate and correct information, the economy would be sound and democracy would be safe. The verified and current information provided by the University was intended as a reliable tool that citizens could use to make their own decisions and govern themselves most effectively. The information could be trusted to provide the efficiency in that equation, but the people and the trust and relationships they built would provide the effectiveness. The Wisconsin Idea was built on the notion that broad and deep social connections make democracy stronger, but this part of our history is less well known. [\(30\) Efficiency vs. Effectiveness](#)

Wisconsin was at the forefront of many of the innovative reform efforts of the Progressive era, including one called the Social Center Movement. Intended to strengthen the capacity for our citizens to actively engage in self-governance, University Extension’s Bureau of Social and Civic Center Development stressed the importance of citizens gathering to intentionally build relationships, trust and common understandings. Fun and entertainment were woven together with serious topics and deliberation. [\(31\) The Social Center and Self-Governance](#) Extension spearheaded this movement, but a famous alumna and future UW Regent also got involved. [\(32\) Zona Gale and “A Social Center Pageant”](#)

While Extension’s role was created to reach out beyond the campus, all the way to the boundaries of the State, the Social Center Movement also influenced the vision of the Wisconsin Idea as enacted on the Madison campus itself. [\(33\) The J. Stephens Tripp Bequest](#) In his 1904 Inauguration Speech, Charles Van Hise had emphasized the value of people on the campus getting to know each other, and had called for us to build a union, dining commons, halls of residence and athletic fields. The intentional development of personal relationships and social capital had a surprising impact on the development of the Wisconsin Idea. [\(34\) Excerpt from Van Hise’s Presidential Inaugural Address of 1904](#), [\(35\) Social Centers On Campus](#)

The goal of the Social Center Movement was to create spaces in communities where people could gather and meet each other in a social context. This would allow them to establish “common ground” so that they could each gain a broader view of what was happening in their communities. The idea was

to create a modern version of the old, egalitarian New England Town Hall Meeting. Like the earlier version, this new effort would encourage the citizens to debate and discuss issues of shared concern.

[\(36\) “Common Ground”](#)

This new effort would focus on frequent, regular interaction not just annual gatherings. In this way, this new approach borrowed strategy from the “Settlement” movement that was happening at the same time. In other places, like New York City, the Settlement Movement and the Social Center Movement were focused on the “uplift” that University people could provide to the poor, especially new immigrants. In Wisconsin, the focus could better be described as “us-lift” than “uplift.” This different approach was similar to the way the UW approached the mission of service to the State. “Service” was often a reflection of “noblesse oblige” at many private universities, while at Wisconsin it was expressly egalitarian and democratic. [\(37\) The Settlement Movement and its Influence on the Social Center Movement](#)

In addition to the deliberative events, there would be shared entertainments and recreation in the Social Centers as well. This approach would also allow the people to build the relationships and trust and the will that it takes to work together to get something done. [\(38\) Social Connections, Trust and Democracy](#) The idea was that these relationships would increase each community’s capacity to govern itself, prosper, and at the same time increase its ability to defend itself from domination by “predatory wealth.”

Each community could truly become its own “Little Democracy” (the title of one of the books on the subject of Social Centers, written during WWI) and true self-governance would grow from the grass roots. The Social Center Movement is easy to envision as part of balancing the “ecosystem for democracy.” [\(39\) The Social Center Movement](#) Though it takes time and effort to build up, social capital within communities could be a counterbalance to the influence of random financial capital from elsewhere.

THE FIRST WAVE OF THE WISCONSIN IDEA CRESTS

The State and the University of Wisconsin became famous because of the power and applicability of the ideas that emerged here at the start of the 20th century. Addressing the ills of the era head-on, with rigor and evidence, and putting ideas into practice, Wisconsin was turning heads with a newly national profile.

Many influential publications had emerged from the University, but there was about to be a crescendo of reform-minded literature coming from Wisconsin in general. Beginning in 1909, Bob La Follette and his wife, Belle, started *La Follette’s Magazine*. A slew of high profile books were published in Madison between 1910 and 1914, including:

- *Conservation of the Natural Resources of the United States* (1910, Van Hise)
 - The very first textbook ever written on Conservation
- *La Follette’s Autobiography* (1911)
 - Written by the Senator as he was preparing to run for the U.S. Presidency

- *The Wisconsin Idea* (McCarthy - 1912)
 - A discussion of the context, aims and results of the famous Wisconsin Legislative Session of 1911, and how it came to pass
- *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* (F.C. Howe -1912)
 - A discussion of what was so different and exciting about Wisconsin and its University
[\(40\) Quotes from Howe's Book](#)
- *Concentration and Control* (Van Hise -1912)
 - A discussion of how the Monopolies of the time could be controlled to encourage competition in the economy, and allow for cooperation. Van Hise spoke that year on the subject at the Economic Club of New York. He also played a national role in helping to resolve some labor disputes in the railroad industry.
- and *The Social Center* (E.J. Ward-1913)
 - A discussion of the First National Conference on Social and Civic Center Development that had been held on the UW Campus in 1911, and the growing national movement. Ward would soon be recruited to lead an effort with the Federal government.

Wisconsin and its University had achieved national celebrity status based on the vision of the Wisconsin Idea and how they had worked together to enact it. We got some interesting responses.

- The 1912 books by McCarthy and Howe, were both reviewed in the same issue of *The New York Times*.
- In May of 1913, 120 members of the Philadelphia Civics Club got on a train and traveled to Madison for 4 days to learn about the Wisconsin Idea. They must have felt it was a powerful vision! [\(41\) The Philadelphia Pilgrimage](#)
- In 1914, *Time* magazine (in its original format, which was like a highbrow version of *The Onion*), published a poem about the fame that the State and its University had achieved. [\(42\) Poem: The Wisconsin Idea as Seen by a Satirist](#)

THE WISCONSIN IDEA SURVIVES STRIFE AND CRISIS

Just at the height of this first wave of the Wisconsin Idea, World War I began. At home, a conservative governor was elected and a backlash against the Progressives began. The Progressive Movement had waned world-wide by the end of WWI. The first big wave of the Wisconsin Idea crested with the end of WWI and the death of Van Hise. But, the Wisconsin Idea lived on. [\(43\) Build a Home for Wisconsin Spirit!](#)

While the Wisconsin Idea (the vision of using knowledge and education to balance an “ecosystem” to support democracy and self-governance) was initially a product of political relationships, it continued to work when the political tide turned in 1914. [\(44\) Timelines of Crises](#) Once they were established as norms, honesty, egalitarianism and trustworthy partnerships always played a key role. [\(45\) Hoard, Graber and the Alfalfa Order use Trust to Turn Alfalfa into Cheese](#)

EACH GENERATION REINVENTS THE WISCONSIN IDEA

For the rest of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st, the vision we've come to know as the Wisconsin Idea has been the moral center of the University of Wisconsin. However, awareness of the rich history of the Wisconsin Idea has waxed and waned. Today, the Wisconsin Idea has come to be associated with the entire public higher education structure of the State, now known as the University of Wisconsin System.

The "Year of the Wisconsin Idea" offers an opportunity for reflection and learning. In examining this legacy, we can consider which parts we want to embrace today, and which parts are now obsolete and need to be left behind.

The Wisconsin Idea is our shared vision, but relationships, earned trust and long-term investments in social capital in service to democracy and the greater good have always been at the heart of its phenomenal power.

Written in 2011 for the Community Partnerships & Outreach (CPO) Staff Network, with support from University Health Services, by Gwen Drury, Ph.D. student in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Links

[\(1\) "The Boundaries of the University are the Boundaries of the State"](#)

1) THE CATCH-PHRASE ITSELF

If we want to reinvigorate the Wisconsin Idea, let's start by tackling our famous slogan. While it was a brilliant, "sticky" catch-phrase when it started, its very stickiness is what trips us up now.

We often behave as if it were actually a definition of the Wisconsin Idea, and that gets us caught up in the logical fallacy that redefining the boundaries in question is what would make the Wisconsin Idea more relevant for our global reach in the 21st century. We need to understand that the values at its core rather than the boundaries at its edges are what define the Wisconsin Idea.

Where did this catch- phrase come from in the first place? Some assume that President Charles Van Hise said it. Not so. It is a paraphrase of something Van Hise actually said. While not misrepresenting what Van Hise said, the paraphraser certainly truncated what he meant.

Robert H. Foss, the Associate Director of the University News Bureau said *he* created this paraphrase of Van Hise's words during the 1930s. Foss had a long career at the UW, retiring in 1971. Foss's slogan was a lot stickier than Van Hise's original phrase, and it stuck. Of course, the saying's consistent appearance "any place where the public could see it" over the course of 40 years gave it an edge too.

Here is the text from an article about Foss in the [Milwaukee Journal](#) of Sunday, June 27, 1971:

"Accent on the News: a column of observations, comments and sidelights by Journal Staff Members and others"

JACK BURKE, University of Wisconsin News Service, Madison. - In 1965, J.E. Boell, UW Archivist, started a search to find the origin of the widely used phrase: "The boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state." He did not have a very long search. The answer was supplied by Robert H. Foss, assistant director of the UW News Service.

Foss recalled that in 1930, when he was a teaching assistant in journalism, he was given the summer job of cleaning up a library-reading room in South Hall, then used in part by the School of Journalism.

"In the process," as Foss tells the story, "I found copies of speeches by Charles R. Van Hise, UW president from 1903-1918. One was of his inaugural address, another was a speech at a campus anniversary celebration, and one more was of a talk before a group of Wisconsin newspapermen."

"I read all the speeches. In one, **Van Hise stated: '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.”

"I liked the statement - and began using it every chance possible - on letterheads, in speeches I wrote for others, any place where the public could see it. I believed it, and wanted everybody else to believe it."

From the widespread use given the phrase, the efforts of Foss, who will retire this year, have been highly successful.

If we don't know the history of what Van Hise actually said, then Foss's catch phrase leaves us debating the issue of boundaries rather than the central organizing principles that made boundaries salient to Van Hise in the first place. In Van Hise's opinion, the University was owned by the State, and was meant to be a tool for helping its citizens to create the most vibrant and engaged democracy possible within it.

2) MORE THAN ONE WAY TO MISINTERPRET THE CATCH-PHRASE?

I recently spoke with someone who had just moved to UW-Madison from a university in California, and was very distressed when he read the catch-phrase, "The Boundaries of the University are the Boundaries of the State." Not knowing the history, he assumed that this was a strong statement of parochialism – that this university intends to hoard its knowledge for itself and not to share it with others. Being a scientist, he found that idea appalling, since scientific discoveries are only possible if scientists share their information. This wasn't his mistake in interpretation but our mistake in communication. Our well-loved and time worn catch phrase no longer serves to clarify our vision.

3) WHAT WAS VAN HISE'S OFFICIAL MOTTO?

Van Hise had announced as part of his Inaugural Ceremonies as President that the motto of his administration would be "*Service to the Commonwealth.*" A commonwealth is defined as:

1 : a nation, state, or other political unit: as **a** : one founded on law and united by compact or tacit agreement by the people for the common good **b** : one in which supreme authority is vested in the people **c** : REPUBLIC

commonwealth. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law*. Retrieved June 10, 2011, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/commonwealth>

As part of the 50th anniversary Jubilee celebration that was combined with his Inauguration festivities in 1904, commemorative medals were made, highlighting this motto. Van Hise's original statement was an expansive one; he wanted the University to provide real value in the lives of all of the state's citizens, not only those who could enroll on the campus as students. Defining the boundaries was not his concern; they had been set before he was born; Van Hise goal was to be inclusive of the people within them.

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(2) Reputations of Van Hise and UW as a University in “The West”

Charles Van Hise spoke before a crowd of 900 at the Economic Club of New York in 1912. (Founded in 1907, this high-profile club still exists today. See <http://econclubny.com/>) The theme of that night’s meeting was “Regulation of Competition vs. Regulation of Monopoly.”

Van Hise summarized his own speech this way, **“My proposal, gentlemen, is neither regulated competition nor regulated monopoly, but freedom in competition, prohibition of monopoly, permission for co-operation, and regulation of the latter.”**

The full text of Van Hise’s speech can be found in the Yearbook of the Economic Club of New York, V. 3 (1912-1913), but in the same volume (pp. 21-22) is the speech of the man who introduced him. **Mr. Speyer’s brief introduction is instructive in terms of summarizing UW’s reputation and follows below:**

After listening to the interesting and progressive speech of Mr. Brandeis of Boston, it seems difficult to remember the time when we here in New York, and in the East generally, looked at suggestions as to legislations, etc., that came to us from the West, with astonishment and distrust; but happily this has changed during recent years. We here realize now that people out there are practically facing the same problems that are before us, and that they are trying to resolve them honestly and perhaps with a little more courage than we have. We understand now that the men out West who propose these measures are just as patriotic and good Americans as we are here. No state has been more active and aggressive in tackling these new problems than has the great state of Wisconsin, and in the front rank have been men connected with the University of Wisconsin. They have furnished correct information, given expert advice, and drafted new laws on various subjects, under the leadership of their President, Dr. Van Hise. His recent book entitled Concentration and Control has won immediate recognition, and the views therein expressed have been incorporated in the Progressive platform. We are very glad that he is spending some time in New York as Chairman of the Board of Arbitration to adjust wages of railway engineers, and we are particularly glad that Dr. Van Hise can be with us tonight.

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(3) The McCarthy Story

The Wisconsin Idea by Charles McCarthy (1912)

PREFACE

In my capacity as legislative librarian for over ten years in the state of Wisconsin, I have been constantly in touch with the legislation of this state, which now seems to be attracting some little attention throughout the country. The legislative reference department has been besieged by newspaper writers who come here to use the files and records. The recent magazines have contained considerable literature relating to the constructive nature of this legislation. Every day this department is called upon to answer many questions concerning particular laws or underlying principles. Our time has been taken up to such an extent that it has been deemed wise, after a great deal of deliberation and perplexity as to what should be done with the increasing volume of correspondence, to set down a few notes about these laws, and the philosophy upon which they are built as I see it. In doing so I am aware of my limitations. I have done the work hurriedly, without due care as to literary standards. Also, I have been handicapped to some degree because I have been working in this department for the legislators and have taken no part in active politics.

In the actual toil and drudgery of the legislative session--in a clerical capacity--I have tried gladly to carry out the will of the men of genius and power who composed the Wisconsin legislature. Working under the direction of the legislature, a large part of this legislation, indeed the principal part of it, was constructed in some connection with the department of which I have been chief. Because of my duties as librarian of the legislative reference department and as a member of the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, I can say truly that I have had opportunities to see events in this state perhaps from a different standpoint than any other man. If I show a certain spirit now and then which may seem to cloud my judgment as to certain matters herein contained, I crave the reader's pardon on the score that I, a wandering student, seeking knowledge, came knocking at the gates of the great University of Wisconsin, and it took me in, filled me with inspiration, and when I left its doors the kindly people of the state stretched out welcoming hands and gave me a man's work to do.

Without the collaboration of my assistant, Miss Ono Mary Imhoff, these rough notes could not have been put together. She has also prepared the short bibliography which may be found in the Appendix and which will show the inquirer how and where to obtain particular laws or documents.

Quote retrieved from Wisconsin Electronic Reader at:

<http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/WIReader/WER1650-2.html>

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(4) Missions of State Universities

All states in the U.S. shared common missions: for the state to enact good, democratic government. The issue of state *universities* is more convoluted. Different states developed state universities at different times, and for different reasons. The different reasons came in waves, as did the resulting universities. The common denominator in all of these missions was to provide the education and training that would allow the people of the state to be successful. Even that mission played out differently in different places.

The first wave occurred just after the founding of the country. Some states, such as Georgia in 1785, established state universities very early, and “were inspired [to do so] by the success of the war for independence and by an effort to find expression for the Age of Reason and for a developing nationalism.” (Rudolph, p. 275).

The second wave of state universities (begun in 1787) was more focused on land than it was on education. The very first Federal land grants that were made specifically to incentivize states to create state universities were made not as part of a grand plan to enhance the intellectual capital of the nation, but to encourage New Englanders to emigrate west (Frederick Rudolf, p. 276).

In 1787, a Massachusetts clergyman named Manasseh Cutler lobbied Congress to create these land grants to induce people from New England to emigrate west. States could sell the lands they were granted and use the money raised to create endowments to found institutions of higher education.

This wave really represented Federal land grants to the states to bolster the sale and private ownership of land, rather than any coordinated attempt to broaden the scope of higher education beyond the privileged classes. According to historian Frederick Rudolph, many of the schools in this wave “were indistinguishable from the denominational colleges which made so much trouble for them.” These were state sponsored colleges whose curricula emphasized the preservation and transfer of the knowledge and attitudes developed in the past, that they would have called “civilization.” The funding sponsorship of these institutions was new, but the curriculum was old by definition.

The third major wave of land grants for state universities was created by an act of Congress in the middle of the Civil War. Signed in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln, it was called the Morrill Act, and the year 2012 represents its 150th anniversary.

The Morrill Land Grant Act

Sponsored by Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill, the Morrill Act was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862. Officially titled "An Act Donating Public Lands to the Several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts," the Morrill Act provided each state with 30,000 acres of Federal land for each member in their Congressional delegation. The land was then sold by the states and the proceeds used to fund public colleges that focused on agriculture and the mechanical arts. Sixty-nine colleges were funded by these land grants, including

Cornell University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Accessed at the Library of Congress website:

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Morrill.html>

By this point in history, the population of the U.S. was growing exponentially, fueled by waves of immigration. Some of the immigrants were highly educated, but most came from uneducated, peasant backgrounds. Many immigrants settled in cities, and cities' populations often grew faster than their infrastructures could, resulting in dangerous conditions caused by overcrowding and exacerbated by poverty.

Many people decided to move west, in search of "free" land along the frontier. The people represented in this movement west were often disconnected from the ways in which they knew how to make a living and needed new skills. Especially concerning was the fact that city people generally did not know how to farm. How would this population be able to feed itself? The Morrill Act therefore specified that its land grants were specifically for establishing educational programs to teach practical skills like agriculture and mechanical studies like engineering, mining, and –due to the timing with the Civil War – military studies.

The mission of state universities that accepted the [first] Morrill Act land grants was now significantly altered.

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(5) Service

John Bascom had pounded into his students' heads "with sledgehammer blows" that they had a moral obligation to serve the state that had made their education possible. Charles Van Hise was the recipient of the very first Ph.D. ever awarded by the UW, and was also the first UW President who was a UW Alumnus. He took Bascom seriously.

Van Hise had announced at the beginning of his term as President that "Service to the Commonwealth" would be the motto of his administration. "Service" was a meaningful term for Charles Van Hise, but he and his Wisconsin peers defined it differently than some others did.

For example, in Germany, universities "serving" the state were serving a monarchy. In Wisconsin, the University was to serve the citizens of a democracy, so that they could run their own democracy better.

In many of the private schools of the eastern U.S., "service" was tinged with a feeling of "noblesse oblige." Service in the Settlement movement was often done in the spirit of "uplift." Service in Wisconsin would better be described as "us-lift."

From *La Follette's Autobiography* (1911)

"In no state of the Union are the relationships between the university and the people of the state so intimate and mutually helpful as in Wisconsin. We believe there that the purpose of the university is to serve the people, and every effort is made through correspondence courses, special courses, housekeepers' conferences, farmers' institutes, experimental stations and the like to bring every resident of the state under the broadening and inspiring influence of a faculty of trained men. At the same time the highest standards of education in the arts and in the professions are maintained in the university itself." (p. 30)

From *The Social Center* (1913) by EJ Ward:

The fact is that while the strong meat of democracy was proving too much for the feeble digestion of Rochester, it had begun to be the regular diet of Wisconsin and the other progressive states. Indeed, the social center idea is just another way of saying the "Wisconsin idea," just the expression in the local neighborhood of the method of fully using the public educational apparatus which on the larger scale of the commonwealth had begun to make the University of Wisconsin the leader among Universities. The mark of the University of Wisconsin is the splendid fact that the people, all throughout the state, realize that they own this institution, and that the men and women of its staff are their hired men and women. The map of Wisconsin is a picture of the campus of the University as served through its great extension division. Most universities have regarded themselves and been regarded somewhat as sacred shrines wherein is kept ever burning the lamp of knowledge and whereto devotees of abstract truth come to worship. The University of Wisconsin has

led the way to the new conception that the function of the university is to serve rather as a central power house whose great dynamos produce driving force and light not only for self-illumination, but **for service of light and power to all the state.** [emphasis added] (p. 203)

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(6) The Power of Their Experiences on Campus

La Follette, Van Hise and Turner each joined debating societies and earned prizes for the speaking skills they honed, but they benefitted the most from the powerful campus culture in which they lived. The “Wisconsin Experience” these guys had as undergrads turned out to be powerful enough to literally change the world. They were hugely influenced by the moral fervor of President Bascom.

It’s ironic that the initial *vision* that would grow to become the Wisconsin Idea came from a man who had a vision-related disability: he was functionally blind. For years at a stretch, Bascom would do all of his extensive reading and writing with the aid of what was then called an “amanuensis.” We should always remember that the man whose mind gave us the values at the core of our institutional being lived in a body that required cooperative assistance to bring those values to light. His talent and passion would have been wasted had he been unwilling to cooperate with or rely on others, or had society refused him that assistance.

When La Follette graduated, he studied law at UW, and then practiced law in Madison, winning election as District Attorney. In spring of 1885, a conflict developed on campus, and Bascom asked La Follette and another young alumnus to use their eyes on his behalf in order to resolve it.

Bascom suspected that UW Regent Elisha Keyes (known as “Boss Keyes”) had short-changed the University in a business transaction. Keyes owned a plant nursery that had installed a number of elm trees on campus. Bascom had learned that the number of trees were less than had been expected, while the bill was for more than expected. Also, the planting had been done in a haphazard way, and many trees had died during winter.

Keyes apparently got wind that this situation had been noticed and sent some workers to replace trees and add more. In spring, Bascom asked a couple of young alumni, one of whom was D.A. La Follette, to inspect the trees to see if more had been added to cover up the bilking. The alumni concluded that they had been.

This incident marked an ever-growing rift between the President and the Regent. Referring to Bascom’s support of Prohibition of alcohol and no doubt to this incident as well, Boss Keyes complained that Bascom was too reflective of the “crankiness of the times.” Indeed, Keyes eventually forced Bascom out of office.

Given the effect that Bascom had exerted on La Follette, Van Hise and Turner when they were undergraduates, these men must have felt Bascom’s ouster personally. It would have represented an example of dishonesty and secrecy exercised by a political “boss,” and of that boss winning a long battle against an admired moral hero. This elm issue was an “inside job” – in the heart of campus, and it took advantage of Bascom’s very low eyesight. This incidence surely added weight to the argument that transparency was a necessary ingredient for overcoming corruption.

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(7) Moral Obligation and Sledgehammer Blows

Both Charles Van Hise (known as “Van”) and Robert La Follette (“Bob”) were UW students and friends during the presidency of John Bascom, as was La Follette’s wife, Belle Case. John Bascom came to the UW as President in 1874, the same year these students entered the University. As President, Bascom was expected to be in charge of the moral development of his students and took this aspect of his job seriously. Bascom, a professor of political economy, had a degree in divinity, and was also a teacher of rhetoric; we can assume that his speeches were powerful. In 1904, when Van Hise was installed as UW President himself, he described in his Inauguration speech that Bascom had pounded a moral message into his students’ heads “with sledge-hammer blows.”

The message that Bascom delivered was informed by the “Social Gospel Movement,” popular among many religious reformers of the times, which eventually became allied with the Progressive Movement. Basically, this line of thought held that Christianity was not established just to allow people to find a way to get their own individual souls into heaven. Instead, the Social Gospel Movement held that God expects Christians to conduct their own daily lives, and to build a society, in such a way that the problems and conditions faced here on earth are improved for all.

For Bascom, it was not much of a stretch to assert that in a State that had built an institution for higher education, those who were fortunate enough to attend it were *morally obligated* to use the knowledge they had gained to serve the people of the State who made the education possible. Both “Van” and “Bob” were deeply influenced by Bascom. In his Presidential Inauguration speech years later, Van Hise stated that Bascom had pounded this message into his students’ heads “with sledgehammer blows.” In his autobiography, La Follette features a photograph of Bascom, whose caption states, “John Bascom’s addresses, with his work in the classroom, were among the most important influences in my early life.”

After graduation from UW, while Charles Van Hise pursued a career as a geologist, his college friend, Bob La Follette pursued a career in law and politics. Their paths would intersect in the future and the experiences they had in the meantime would greatly shape their thinking and actions, but Bascom’s message of seeking knowledge not in order to seek personal privilege but to in order to seek a better world for the common good would be the touchstone for the emerging vision that would become the Wisconsin Idea.

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(8) Van Hise on the Highest Purpose of Acquiring Knowledge

The least commendable purpose of acquiring knowledge ...is to apply it to one's own advancement – to achieve worldly success. A higher purpose is to fit one to live the intellectual life....A third and the highest purpose of acquiring knowledge is to use it for the benefit of mankind.

– Charles Van Hise

From “The University and the State” The Wisconsin Alumni Magazine V. 16, #1 (October 1914). An excerpt from a speech given in Louisiana, by Joseph E. Davis.

Taken from an annotated bibliography compiled by Shirley E. Johnson, Extension Historian, University of Wisconsin Extension, April 1998.

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[\(9\) Sifting & Winnowing](#)

Many people make the mistake of thinking that the iconic plaque on the foundation of Bascom Hall is the statement of the Wisconsin Idea, since the statement it bears is also so central to our University's identity. The famous plaque reads:

Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found. (Taken from a report of the Board of Regents in 1894) Memorial, Class of 1910

The statement deals with academic freedom, and was the outcome of incidents involving a professor who was later involved in the first blossoming of the Wisconsin Idea, but is not an interchangeable concept. Rather, its insistence on the fearless pursuit of truth is an underpinning for the emergence of the vision, since it establishes the pursuit of truth as central to the University's role. That role would become pivotal in balancing the ecosystem to support democracy.

So what happened that resulted in this famous statement and a famous plaque that has been bolted to the foundation of Bascom Hall for decades?

Richard T. Ely had been accused of teaching socialism in his classes. The accusation was made in a letter published in the magazine *The Nation*, in 1894. The Regents conducted an investigation and at the hearing Ely was exonerated of the charges. The statement on the plaque is an excerpt from the statement written by the Regents in response to his hearing.

Ely wrote his autobiography, *The Ground Under Our Feet*, many years later. In it, he described the Regents' statement as the University's "Magna Carta," and as foundational to all that followed.

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(10) John R. Commons

Commons became nationally renowned as a reformer and a proponent of the Wisconsin Idea.

Follow this link to the State Historical Society's biographical page to learn about the influence that Commons had on the State and the nation. Though he would not have thought in terms of ecosystems, the link below describes efforts that seem consistent with balancing an ecosystem for democracy.

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/topics/commons/>

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[\(11\) Mentoring Relationships](#)

Mentoring relationships were another aspect of social capital that was pivotal in how our history developed. In Sociology today, we would call this “bonding social capital.” (The opposite type, “bridging social capital” played a huge role in Wisconsin history as well.)

Charles Van Hise talked about what a difference it made to him in life that a professor named Roland Irving, had treated him as a serious colleague and a friend, while Van Hise was a student.

In 1884, Frederick Jackson Turner graduated from the UW. He had had a very supportive mentor in History Professor Allen. Young Turner decided that he wanted to teach History. Since Wisconsin did not yet offer Ph.D. degrees, he would go on to earn one in History from the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where his dissertation would focus on the fur trade in Territorial Wisconsin.

While at Johns Hopkins, Turner studied with a professor named Richard Ely. Turner would then return to Wisconsin to hold a position as a professor of history (1890-1910), and would soon be instrumental in bringing Richard Ely to the Wisconsin faculty. Ely was at the center of a controversy in 1894 that resulted in the famous “Sifting and Winnowing” plaque on Bascom Hall.

Van Hise mentions the importance of mentoring in his 1904 inauguration speech, stating, “The professor in the classroom and the laboratory can do much for a student, and especially he can do much if he believes that one of the highest functions of a professor is that of a comrade.”

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(12) Turner's Famous "Frontier Thesis"

Turner would emerge as one of the most famous Historians in the U.S. as a result of his essay, first presented at the AHA meeting held in Chicago in conjunction with the 1893 World's Fair, entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." His main points in this essay became known as "The Frontier Thesis" of American History.

Turner emphasizes that the character of the new nation was crucially influenced by the individualistic mentality that people needed to have in order to venture out and settle in undeveloped lands. He also asserted that the fact that Americans settling at the line of the "frontier" – which moved constantly westward – were always in a state of high alert and military readiness. They never knew when they would be involved in violent skirmishes with the native peoples that the Federal government was methodically removing (either killing in declared "Indian Wars" or displacing onto reservations through treaties) in order to expand the boundaries of the new nation.

At the same time that Turner was positing the source of these national characteristics, he was also declaring the frontier itself to be obsolete. He points out that the U.S. has reached a pivotal moment, as noted in the U.S. Census documents. After decades of demarcating "civilization" from "frontier", this once-important line has ceased to exist in these documents.

Turner's claim is that this newly-disappeared abstraction should represent a turning point for the American psyche. He discusses the dynamic that as lands were taken over by settlers, their uses developed in predictable, sequential cycles: hunting and gathering was followed grazing of animals which was followed by simple agriculture in which un-rotated crops exploit the soil, like growing grain in the same place over and over; then comes more intensive and complex agriculture; next comes the establishment of towns and trade and simple industry; the development of capital and the development of a labor force is followed by the development of complex industry.

He points out in the essay that Wisconsin was, at the time, in the agricultural phase of development. He doesn't mention that we were shifting from a wheat state to a dairy state. He does mention that Wisconsin was just beginning to develop industry at that time. He had developed a defined sense of where he thought Wisconsin was on this seemingly inevitable continuum, and his opinions at the end of the 19th century would influence the development of the Wisconsin Idea at the start of the 20th.

These cycles had emerged in Europe over a much more extended period of time, and hadn't traveled, like a visible wave, along an ever-moving frontier line. Turner discusses others' conjectures that the very visible development process revealed by the brand new country's spread westward actually gave a sort of time-lapse window onto a process that took eons to emerge in other places. This hyper-spiced-up version of the process allowed historians to surmise how development might have progressed in Europe and other, older developed cultures.

Likewise, Europeans hadn't had the availability of "free land" as an incentive for an individual to pull up stakes if things weren't working out where they were at that moment. When Europeans sought the free land, they left Europe for America. When these people left, their new experiences didn't then become a

driver for the character of their nations: they were gone. Turner would suggest, however, that the desire that these immigrants had for land ownership and the upward social mobility which such ownership represented to them, would translate once they arrived in the U.S. into another major driver of America's westward expansion. (He is said to have developed that idea upon observing the behavior of the Irish immigrants who were buying land surrounding Madison, Wisconsin at the time.)

Turner sensed a major shift in the zeitgeist. In retrospect, we now call the next era to emerge the Machine Age, or the Modern Era. As an Historian, Turner was not in the business of predicting what would come next. However, his opinions on what had come before and how those events had shaped our local and national lives would become woven into visions for the future. Turner had long friendships with Charles Van Hise and Bob La Follette. Turner and Van Hise spent several years as young professors living across from each other on Frances Street. He also had a strong influence on a particular student named Charles McCarthy, who studied for his Ph.D. in History under Turner's guidance.

As a historian, Turner was one of the first to move away from a focus on purely political history – which king had slain which king in which battle in which year to what end – and focus instead on economic and social history. His focus in historical research was radical at the time: it was more on the grassroots and the dirt in which those roots grew than on the heads of state. He felt that the decisions of everyday people, when viewed en masse, indicated the important trends of history. In fact, they created history.

Though he was not cast as a "Conservationist," Turner's conceptual framework would have supported a focus among his colleagues on campus on the potential for creating an ecosystem balanced to support democracy.

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(13) Frederick Jackson Turner on Public Higher Education

In Charles McCarthy's book, *The Wisconsin Idea* (1912), Chapter V is on Educational Legislation, and it begins with these words:

Says that great student of Western history, Professor Frederick J. Turner, formerly of Wisconsin, now of Harvard University:--

"Nothing in our educational history is more striking than the steady pressure of democracy upon its universities to adapt them to the requirements of all the people. From the State Universities of the Middle West, shaped under pioneer ideals, have come the fuller recognition of scientific studies, and especially those of applied science devoted to the conquest of nature; the breaking down of the traditional required curriculum; the union of vocational and college work in the same institution; the development of agricultural and engineering colleges and business courses; the training of lawyers, administrators, public men, and journalists – all under the ideal of service to democracy rather than of individual advancement alone. Other universities do the same things; but the head springs and the main current of this great stream of tendency come from the land of the pioneers, the democratic states of the Middle West. And the people themselves, through their boards of trustees and the legislature, are in the last resort the court of appeal as to the directions and conditions of growth...have the fountain of income from which these universities derive their existence....

In the transitional conditions of American democracy...the mission of the University is more important. The times call for educated leaders. General experience and rule-of-thumb information are inadequate for the solution of the problems of a democracy which no longer owns the safety funds of an unlimited quantity of untouched resources. Scientific farming must increase the yield of the soil, scientific forestry must economize the woodlands, scientific experiment and construction by chemist, physicist, biologist and engineer must be applied to all of nature's forces in our complex modern society. The test tube and the microscope are needed rather than axe and rifle in this new ideal of conquest. The very discoveries of science in such fields as public health and manufacturing processes have made it necessary to depend upon the expert, and if the ranks of experts are to be recruited broadly from the democratic masses as well as from those of larger means, the State Universities must furnish at least as liberal opportunities for research and training as the universities based on private endowments furnish. It needs no argument to show that it is not to best advantage of democracy to give over the training of the expert exclusively to privately endowed institutions.

The people of Wisconsin have demanded this efficiency and the University of Wisconsin has been noted not only for the philosophy of service to the state which has been maintained but for the practical courses which deal with every factor in the life of the state.

NOTE: Turner left Wisconsin for Harvard in 1910; this is likely the reason that he is not commonly cited as a source of the Wisconsin Idea vision. This vision did not have a name until Charles McCarthy (Turner's student) wrote the book by that name in 1912. Turner is quoted by McCarthy in that book.

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(14) Turner & La Follette Work to Get Van Hise as UW President

When President Adams resigned due to failing health, the Regents were at an impasse for over a year, in trying to select his replacement. The top two candidates were the Interim President Birge and Van Hise. Turner campaigned vigorously to get the Regents to select Van Hise as President of UW, earning himself a nickname on campus of “the Kingmaker.” As various Regents left office when their terms expired, La Follette, then Governor, kept replacing them with Regents who would vote in favor of Van Hise.

Van Hise was finally selected and took office in fall 1903. He saved his official Inauguration until the spring of 1904, to coincide with the 50 year anniversary “Jubilee” celebration of the University, and with Commencement. The celebration lasted for days that June.

Van Hise was not only the recipient of the very first Ph.D. ever awarded by this campus, years later he was also the first UW alumnus ever to become UW President.

That August, Van Hise’s Inaugural Speech was printed in its entirety (beginning on the front page) in *Science* magazine. In this speech, he outlines his vision for the state university of the future. In retrospect, we can now see that he made this vision happen.

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[\(15\) Charles McCarthy and the Legislative Reference Library](#)

The Legislative Reference Library was a Wisconsin innovation that was eventually adopted by the U.S. Library of Congress. In Wisconsin, it was a powerful link in the reform process. But, its initial development may have had more to do with convenience than with reform of the legislative process.

In 1900, the State Historical Society's books were moved out of the Capitol building to the other end of State Street, to be housed in the same building at the base of Bascom Hill with the University's book collection.

The Legislators missed the easy access to the history books. The void created was filled by creating a new "Legislative Reference Library" within the Capitol, where the most relevant books and information resources from the past and present were made available to Legislators. University Faculty with relevant expertise were also brought in to consult with Legislators on researching and drafting solid legislation, via the LRB. It was a direct and productive link between the University and the State.

Charles McCarthy, who had studied for his Ph.D. in History with Frederick Jackson Turner, and was now working as a clerk for the Free Library Commission, was selected to develop and lead the new library. McCarthy developed this library into a trusted, non-partisan service for working with legislators on researching and drafting legislation.

The U.S. Library of Congress later established a Legislative Reference Library, based on the model developed in Wisconsin.

McCarthy would also play a pivotal role in the development of UW Extension. And, as Extension took on leadership in the national Social Center Movement, McCarthy would become a keynote speaker at national meetings.

NOTE: History Professor Frederick Jackson Turner began conducting his graduate student "seminars" in the Library itself. When other universities tried to recruit him away from Madison, the now-famous Turner would often cite the magnificent library resources here as one of many reasons that he did not want to leave.

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(16) The Progressive Movement, Wisconsin Farmers and the Railroads

In *La Follette's Autobiography* (1911), Bob says that in Wisconsin, farmers were the first to resist monopolies, in the form of railroads. He also says that both political parties were controlled by the railroad interests, and that this situation blocked legislative reform for years.

From pages 18-22:

In the State of Wisconsin the Progressive movement expressed itself in the rise to power of the Patrons of Husbandry. The Grange movement swept four or five Middle Western states, expressing vigorously the first powerful revolt against the rise of monopolies, the arrogance of railroads and the waste and robbery of public lands. Those hard-headed old pioneers from New England and from northern Europe thought as they plowed, went far toward roughing out the doctrine in regard to railroad control which the country has since adopted. At that time there was no settled policy, no established laws, but their reasoning was as direct and simple as their lives. It was plain to them that the railroad was only another form of highway. They knew that for the purposes of a highway, the public could enter upon and take part of their farms. If, the, the right of passage through the country came from the people, the people should afterward have the right to control the use of the highway. It was this simple reasoning which was subsequently adopted by the legislatures and courts....

In Wisconsin the Granger movement went so far as to cause a political revolution and the election in 1874 of a Democratic governor. [NOTE: 1874 was also the year that John Bascom became President of the UW. Charles Van Hise and Bob La Follette first enrolled as undergraduates that same year.] A just and comprehensive law for regulating the railroads was passed and a strong railroad commission was instituted. It was then, indeed, that the railroads began to dominate politics for the first time in this country. They saw that they must either accept control by the state or control the state. They adopted the latter course; they began right there to corrupt Wisconsin – indeed to corrupt all the states of the Middle West. And as usual they were served by the cleverest lawyers and writers that money could hire. They asserted that the panic of 1873 was caused by the Granger agitation and that capital was being driven from the state by popular clamor. To these arguments they added open threats and defiance of the law. On April 28, 1874, Alexander Mitchell, President of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company, wrote a letter to Governor Taylor in which he asserted directly that his company would disregard the state law. These are his words: "Being fully conscious that the enforcement of this law will ruin the property of the company and feeling assured of the correctness of the opinions of the eminent counsel who have examined the question, the directors feel compelled to disregard the provisions of the law so far as it fixes a tariff of rates for the company until the courts have finally passed upon the question of its validity."

A more brazen defiance of law could scarcely be conceived. The railroads looked to the courts for final protection, but the law which they thus defied was not only sustained by the Supreme Court of Wisconsin, but by the Supreme Court of the United States.

But the railroads did not intend to submit to control, courts or no courts, and by fallacious argument, by threats, by bribery, by political manipulation, they were able to force the legislature to repeal the law which the Supreme Court had sustained. By that assault upon free government in Wisconsin and in other Middle Western states the reasonable control of corporations was delayed in this country for many years.

From that moment in the seventies – excepting once, and then only for a period of two years when the agricultural and dairy interests defeated the corporations, and elected William D. Hoard governor [1889-90] – until my fight was finally successful, **Wisconsin was a corrupted state, governed not by the people but by a group of private and corporate interests.** [emphasis added] They secured control of the old Republican Party organization – the party with the splendid history – and while its orators outwardly dwelt upon the glories of the past and inspired the people with the fervor of patriotic loyalty, these corporation interests were bribing, bossing and thieving within. The machine organization of the Democratic Party was as subservient to the railroads and other corporations as the Republican machine, and mastery of legislation was thus rendered complete through all these years.

NOTE: It was during the last decades of the 1800s that the University of Wisconsin began more intensive interaction directly with farmers from around the State, creating Short Courses held during the winter months to make the most current information and research results available to farmers engaged in actively running farms.

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[\(17\) Bob La Follette on the Goals of the Progressive Movement](#)

From *La Follette's Autobiography* (1911) by Robert Marion La Follette, page 369 (*available to read in full online, through Google Books*).

...If it can be shown that Wisconsin is a happier and better state to live in, that its institutions are more democratic, that the opportunities of all its people are more equal, that social justice more nearly prevails, that human life is safer and sweeter – then I shall rest content in the feeling that the Progressive movement has been successful.

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[\(18\) A Self-Organizing System for Self-Governance & Democracy](#)

An Ecosystem is a self-organizing system that stays in one form or another depending on how it is balanced (by what is in it). The Wisconsin Idea was more about creating a self-organizing system – an ecosystem balanced to support an egalitarian democracy and a participatory economy – than it was about promulgating a doctrine or structuring a centralized plan.

In the conclusion of his book, *The Wisconsin Idea* (1912) Charles McCarthy says,

This little book advocates no new philosophy or doctrine; there is no “ism” in this plan. It urges simply logical consideration of one thing after another as necessity appears. Every other plan of man, however wise and complete it may have been, had failed....What is the need of a philosophy or an “ism” where there is obvious wrong to be righted? Whatever has been accomplished in Wisconsin seems to have been based on this idea of making practice conform to the ideals of justice and right which have been inherited. If the weak ask for justice, the state should see that they get it certainly, quickly and surely. If certain social classes are forming among us, can we not destroy them by means of education and through hope and encouragement make every man more efficient so that the door of opportunity may always be open before him?

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(19) Predators and Balance

Limnology professor, Stephen Carpenter, undertook a comparison of two undeveloped lakes in Wisconsin. Named Peter and Paul, the lakes are located next to each other and had identical ecosystems. Carpenter's research team was able to use one as an experiment and the other as a "control" for comparison. Though it had long been established that ecosystems could flip from one type to another, Carpenter's team was hoping to establish whether or not such a shift (called *Regime Shift*) could be detected in advance. His study was designed to monitor all aspects of the lake's ecosystem and to detect signs of impending shift.

Over the course of 3 years, the research team added Big Mouth Bass to the experimental lake, but did nothing to the control lake. As expected by the scientists, the addition of a big, mean predator made a difference in the Regime of the lake. What might be surprising to a non-scientist is that fear played a significant role.

The shift from a lake ecosystem supporting a thriving community of small fish to a lake dominated by predators didn't happen just because of a shift in numbers. In other words, the crucial factor wasn't just that the predators consumed the smaller fish and changed the absolute numbers and ratios.

It turns out that the growing predator dynamic also created a shift in attitude. As the lake became dominated by the predators, the behavior of the small fish changed. They no longer swam freely throughout the lake. Instead, they clung to the shores and lurked near structures like fallen branches, etc. in the water. Fear became pervasive and changed their overall behavior. They no longer swam to the open water in the middle of the lake and fed on the water fleas on the surface of the water there. As a result, the water flea population soared, and they ate an extraordinary amount of the zooplankton on which they feed. At a certain point, the population of zooplankton reached a critical level and the ecosystem snapped into a Regime Shift. The ecosystem had now changed to a new balance that was dominated by the presence of the predator species.

Carpenter doesn't make a judgment about whether the new ecosystem or the original one is the "better" ecosystem; he was just trying to observe and predict the shift. The research finding that fear is what initiated the change in behavior that set the switch in motion was what was surprising. It is also why this study works as a metaphor for what the founders of the Wisconsin Idea were doing. They were using education as one of the tools for eliminating fear; they did not want citizens to be risk averse, cowering in the shallows or hiding behind others. A university committed to "sifting and winnowing" in search of truth and verification, and dedicated to providing the best possible education and information to the widest range of citizens served a pivotal role in establishing transparency and driving out fear. An ecosystem balanced to support democracy would be one in which all of the inhabitants would feel confident in their ability to fully participate in their own governance and their own economy.

NOTE: Dr. Carpenter and the team of scientists who did the study on detecting ecosystem collapse were not consulted about the fact that their work inspired a metaphor! Here is a link to the press release that inspired it:

<http://www.news.wisc.edu/releases/16648>

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(20) Distinguishing between Self-Governance and Democracy

Democracy and self-governance are so closely related, they sometimes seem synonymous. However, distinguishing between the two can help us clarify the vision of the Wisconsin Idea.

Democracy is a form of government. Self-governance describes the way in which democracy is enacted. The form of government shared by all of the states in the U.S. is democracy, but the degree of self-governance in any given state falls somewhere along a continuum of engagement.

For example, one vision of a democracy looks like a top-down organization. In this scenario, democracy is more like a spectator sport, or a fantasy football league. The citizens vote; the people who are voted in are the ones who make all of the decisions. Citizens make election decisions, put good talent in the game, cheer on their team, and hope for the best. Crushing the opposition and feeling good about your own team is the goal. But everybody accepts that you don't really have that much input, aside from your vote in elections or the money you give to help influence other peoples' votes in elections. Still, we all know that cheering from the sidelines can give us the feeling that we're really participating; the feeling can be incredibly strong. It can even become physical. We can shout ourselves hoarse or pull our backs out doing a victory dance. This sort of participation seems so real. We can bask in reflected glory if our team wins; we can ignore the whole situation if our team loses. We bear little responsibility in either case.

A democracy can also be run as a participatory sport, with citizens giving continuous input into all processes and decisions. In this version, the citizens pick the leaders to keep the governing process going, but are still continuously calling the plays. Citizens are not only the owner and the coach, but the players, the team doctor, the team bus driver and the tailgating fans. In this version, the citizens are also the other team! So, rather than concentrating on crushing the opposition, everyone's goal is to govern in a way that makes the sport as fair as possible, the competition as vigorous as possible, and all of the games better for everyone. For this version to work, the citizens need to have the best information, familiarity with the process, clear and fair rules, and the personal ability to be in the game.

The vision of the Wisconsin Idea was to create an educational system that supports citizens in getting everything they need to be top notch, active participants in their own self-governance and economic success. Educating themselves would help citizens balance their ecosystem so that it could not slip under someone else's control. Neither political bosses nor economic monopolists would be able to upset or distort the balance of the democratic system.

The people who brought us the Wisconsin Idea were striving to achieve a balance in our political/cultural/economic/natural ecosystem that would support deeply engaged, fully informed and aware self-governance - by the broadest possible spectrum of people – for the longest amount of time.

SELF-GOVERNANCE AT U.W.-MADISON

This spirit of engagement in self governance for the benefit of all was manifest on campus, in UW-Madison's Faculty Senate, the Academic Staff Assembly and the Associated Students of Madison. Wisconsin's shared governance is a matter of state statute, not mere custom or nicety.

Student Self-Governance on Campus

1898

UW's first Dean of Women, Annie Emery, helped to found the Women's Self Governance Association (p. 669, V.1, Curti & Carstensen), within Chadbourne Hall – which was the women's college on campus at the time.

1916

A Student Senate for the male students was chartered and went into effect, "granting specific powers to the senate to regulate the nonacademic affairs of the male students." (p. 508 Curti & Carstensen)

May 26, 1928

Professor Harold Bradley presides over the ceremony transferring control over Wisconsin Union affairs to the Union Council, which is constituted of a student majority. (p. 121, Cronon & Jenkins, V.3) Bradley was the Faculty chair of the committee working on the Union building.

Around the same time, Professor Bradley was also instrumental in getting the first men's' residence halls built and setting up the student self-governance in those halls.

2011 - STUDENT SHARED GOVERNANCE ON THE UW-MADISON CAMPUS TODAY

Below is from the Associated Students of Madison website:

<http://www.asm.wisc.edu/shared-governance.html>

Shared governance is one of the most unique and important aspects of the University of Wisconsin System. Wisconsin has some of the **strongest legislation in the country that specifically protects shared governance as an institution in education**. The portion that applies to students, 36.09(5), states that *"students shall have the primary responsibility for the formulation and review of policies concerning student life, services, and interests...The students of each institution or campus shall have the right to organize them selves in a manner they determine and to select their representatives to participate in institutional governance."* This powerful language guarantees students a voice when decisions are made that affect them.

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(21) Pioneers as an Invasive Species?

When we use the metaphor of balancing the ecosystem to favor participatory democracy, we need to acknowledge that this land has hosted other ecosystems at other times. It has also hosted other forms of human governance and other forms of education.

We need to acknowledge that the physical/social ecosystem that the Progressives were trying to balance to allow participatory democracy to flourish was a new one. The indigenous ecosystem had already been changed; to use ecological terms, “regime shift” had occurred already. See also [\(12\) Turner’s Frontier Thesis](#). Based on that thesis, he would probably have argued that several ecological “regime shifts” had occurred here by this time.)

Native Americans who lived on this land for an estimated 12,000 years before the United States declared it a Territory or a State had lived in a physical/social ecosystem of a different type. The fact that they had survived these northern winters and thrived here for so long indicates that their physical/social ecosystem had existed in a healthy balance for a very long time. They clearly educated their young people in a way that helped them preserve that balance over the centuries. We know, too, that many tribes used group consensus for making decisions, so we can also say that they had balanced their ecosystem through a form of democracy.

That balance was disrupted by the arrival of new groups of people whose behavior could be compared to what we would now call an “Invasive Species.” Below is the definition of an invasive species, as retrieved (in 2011) from the website of the National Invasive Species Council:

<http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/docs/council/isacdef.pdf>

Invasive Species Definition Clarification and Guidance White Paper

**Submitted by the Definitions Subcommittee
of the Invasive Species Advisory Committee (ISAC)**

Approved by ISAC April 27, 2006

Preamble: Executive Order 13112 – defines an *invasive species* as “**an alien species whose introduction does or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.**” In the Executive Summary of the National Invasive Species Management Plan (NISMP) the term *invasive species* is further clarified and defined as “**a species that is non-native to the ecosystem under consideration and whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.**”

In terms of the “ecosystem for balanced to support democracy” metaphor, we would have to acknowledge that the pioneers and settlers acted like an “invasive species,” crowding out and killing off the native species. This process was not accidental, nor was it done by attrition; it was violent and has been called “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing.” It was also U.S. national policy.

BOUNDARIES ARRIVE WITH THE INVASIVE SPECIES

The First Nations on this continent were just that: sovereign nations. Because of this sovereign status, all official relationships between the government of the native residents and that of the newly arriving “United States” settlers had been established on a nation-to-nation basis. The “Indian Wars” and “Indian Removals” were conducted by the Federal government, rather than the states.

State boundaries must have seemed particularly arbitrary to native people whose mental maps of the place, constructed over centuries, had never included them. What could it have meant to them to see universities based on state boundaries? For native people in Wisconsin, state university education designed to help people maintain hands-on control of their own governance and their own economies must have carried some bitter irony.

TO THE INVASIVE SPECIES, LAND GRANTS SEEM LIKE “FREE LAND”

When the Federal government made “land grants” to the states, the lands they gave had been secured by taking them from native peoples. The states receiving grants were encouraged to sell these lands, and to use the proceeds to establish educational institutions.

In many cases, these lands had never before been “capitalized” – owned and exchanged for money. Frederick Jackson Turner dealt with the processes of the capitalization of land as the “frontier” advanced across the continent, but he focused entirely on the effect it had on the newly arrived peoples, and their expectations of the future. The native people did not figure into his analysis except as a strong presence that always lurked on the edge of settlers’ minds. This presence could be a potential trading partner or a potential threat to life and limb. Turner felt that this constant need to be prepared for battles as the new nation was established and expanded had left an indelible mark on the character of the United States. He did not comment on the mark it had left on the First Nations.

CAPITALIZATION OF THE LAND IS THE BASIS FOR LAND GRANTS

Even if the people of the First Nations had not been killed and driven out, simply the capitalization of the land alone would have represented a huge “regime shift” in their existing ecosystem, from use-value to exchange-value. And we should not forget that it was the capitalization of the land that made funding of state higher education possible through Federal land grants. The land was granted not for universities to use (use value), but for them to sell (exchange value). The tracts of land in question came from all over the area of the state, while the University was located in a single city at the time.

Early historians of the State of Wisconsin and its University talk about the value that was squandered by the early governments of the State. Large tracts of the lands that were granted were sold to speculators - quickly, cheaply and in bulk - rather than waiting longer and selling individual parcels directly to settlers at higher prices per acre. The speculators were the ones who then reaped the profit as land values rose with the arrival of more settlers, and nothing stopped speculators from moving west with the frontier line, taking their profits with them. The State was left without funds. Due to its initial mismanagement of the first land grants – corruption and a focus on short term profit rather than long-

term stewardship – Wisconsin had to ask the Federal government for additional land grants to fund the University during the early days of State-hood.

Land Grants Made by U.S. Congress in 1862, 1890 and 1994

In **1862**, the first Morrill Act granted more land to state universities that would establish programs in agriculture, engineering, mining and military studies.

In **1890**, the second Morrill Act made land grants to establish colleges for the education of African-Americans.

The Federal “Equity in Educational Land Grant Status Act of **1994**” designated funds for Tribal Colleges.

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[\(22\) Theodore Roosevelt's introduction to Charles McCarthy's book](#)

Theodore Roosevelt, in writing the introduction to Charles McCarthy's book, *The Wisconsin Idea* (1912) put it this way:

The Wisconsin reformers have accomplished the extraordinary results for which the whole nation owes them so much, primarily because they have not confined themselves to dreaming dreams and then to talking about them. They have had power to see the vision, of course; if they did not have in them the possibility of seeing visions, they could accomplish nothing; but they have tried to make their ideals realizable, and they have tried, with an extraordinary measure of success, actually to realize them. As soon as they decided that a certain object was desirable they at once set to work practically to study how to develop the constructive machinery through which it could be achieved. This is not an easy attitude to maintain. Yet every true reformer must ever work in the spirit, and with the purpose, of that greatest of all democratic reformers, Abraham Lincoln. Therefore he must make up his mind that like Abraham Lincoln he will be assailed on the one side by the reactionary, and on the other by that type of bubble reformer who is only anxious to go to extremes, and who always gets angry when he is asked what practical results he can show. Mr. McCarthy emphasizes the lesson that cheap clap-trap does not pay, and that the true reformer must study hard and work patiently.

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(23) Plutocrats and Party Bosses

In *La Follette's Autobiography* (1911), Bob states that he frequently quoted Wisconsin's Chief Justice Edward G. Ryan.

Said he: "There is looming up a new and dark power. I cannot dwell upon the signs and shocking omens of its advent. The accumulation of individual wealth seems to be greater than it ever had been since the fall of the Roman Empire. The enterprises of the country are aggregating vast corporate combinations of unexampled capital, boldly marching, not for economic conquests only, but for political power. For the first time really in our politics money is taking the field as an organized power....Already, here at home, one great corporation has trifled with sovereign power, and insulted the state. There is grave fear that it, and its great rival, have confederated to make partition of the state and share it as spoils....The question will arise, and arise in your day, though perhaps not fully in mine, 'Which shall rule – wealth or man; which shall lead – money or intellect; who shall fill public stations – educated and patriotic free men, or the feudal serfs of corporate capital?'"

It was this power, though I did not know it then, nor indeed fully until years later that spoke through the voice of Boss Keyes when he attempted to deny my right to appear before the people of Dane County as a candidate for District Attorney. It was this power which held together and directed the county machine, the state machines, the national machine, of both the old parties. Of course, the Boss and the machine had nothing against me personally. All it wanted was the acceptance of its authority and leadership: what it feared and hated was independence and freedom. (pp. 23-25)

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(24) Van Hise on the Place of a University in a Democracy

In taking part in the work of advancement of the State the staff of the university should be free from intellectual arrogance and devoid of any attempt to force their ideas upon the people. If the State gives freedom of teaching and investigation to the university staff, also the people of the State should be free to accept or reject as their judgment may dictate.

-Charles Van Hise

“The Place of a University in a Democracy.” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1916.

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[\(25\) Service of Light and Power to All the State](#)

From *The Social Center* (1913) by Edward J. Ward, Advisor to the Bureau of Social and Civic Center Development, University Extension at the University of Wisconsin:

Most universities have regarded themselves and been regarded somewhat as sacred shrines wherein is kept ever burning the lamp of knowledge and whereto devotees of abstract truth come to worship. The University of Wisconsin has led the way to the new conception that the function of the university is to serve rather as a central power house whose great dynamos produce driving force and light not only for self illumination but for service of light and power to all the state. (p. 203).

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[\(26\) University Experts](#)

This idea wasn't new; Germany had already established the practice of using its state-sponsored universities' expertise to serve the German state. Wisconsin had many German immigrants, and had many sources of current information about the stunning levels of efficiency that Germany was achieving through this model.

But, Germany had a monarch, so by serving the state, German intellectuals were in service to the Kaiser. The Wisconsin idea included using this model of knowledge-sharing to serve democracy, rather than monarchy.

There were more idiosyncratic reasons why Wisconsin adopted this practice as well. In the early years of the 20th century, before there were many trained experts in the state, Bob La Follette began a practice that continued for many years. Many of his trusted friends were professors at the University. He had learned to trust the motivations and the truth-seeking values of the University, through his experiences there when John Bascom was President. He both consulted with professors from the University who were experts on issues with which he was concerned, and appointed them to commissions and committees.

A pivotal manifestation of this partnership was the establishment of the Legislative Reference Bureau, with Charles McCarthy as its head. The LRB put the knowledge resources of the University in easy access to the Legislators, and set up a dynamic that allowed them to collaborate and produce legislation based on solidly researched, independently validated facts. So effective was this model that the United States' Library of Congress adopted it for use with the Legislators in Washington, D.C.

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[\(27\) Clarifying Some Confusion about Extension](#)

Some people feel confused about the difference between “Cooperative Extension” and “University Extension” and “UW Extension.” Throw in the fact that many professors have appointments in more than one kind of Extension, and that the funding streams are separate, andmaybe this will help:

Late 1800s University Extension referred to activities in which professors would travel out to places around the state to present lectures and short courses. Given that these professors were still expected to teach classes on campus and that horse & buggy was not a rapid means of transportation, this effort gradually diminished as faculty energy did. Frederick Jackson Turner, the famous professor of History, had done traveling lectures for this early form of Extension. One of his Ph.D. students on campus, Charles McCarthy, would later play a “game changing” role in what “University Extension” would mean in Wisconsin’s future.

1906 and 1907 In 1906, Charles McCarthy suggests to Charles Van Hise that expanding correspondence courses would be a good idea and would fulfill the motto of the Van Hise administration, “Service to the Commonwealth.” Van Hise was apparently lukewarm about this approach until McCarthy personally sponsored a study of the number of people in Wisconsin who were signing up for correspondence courses and how much they were paying for the courses.

Now convinced that there was a significant demand among Wisconsinites for such educational opportunities, and that the University could deliver a better, more accurate product to the citizens at a lower cost, Van Hise took a big step in 1906 and established the first, *official* Division of University Extension in the nation. (Many states were doing some form of extension activities, but not in an institutionalized way.) The Legislature approved dedicated funding for the new Division in 1907.

1914 The U.S. Government passes the Smith-Lever Act and establishes Cooperative Extension, especially to serve the nation’s rural populations. The USDA is now connected to state universities and counties. 4-H is introduced as part of Cooperative Extension. But in Wisconsin, popular Horticulture Professor R.A. Moore has been successfully running clubs (“Corn Clubs”) for rural children for years; he takes on 4-H as well.

1915 By 1915, the University of Wisconsin’s budget for its Division of University Extension is now roughly double that of its next closest peer institution. Clearly, the vision of the Wisconsin Idea is what invigorated (maybe turbo-charged is a better word) the outreach mission at Wisconsin.

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[\(28\) More Suited for the 21st Century than the 20th?](#)

Remember, the 20th century's main focus was on things, and how to break them down into the smallest constituent parts. In terms of manufacturing, the goal was to make constituent parts standardized and therefore interchangeable.

This thinking spilled over into human relations as well. The rise of the bureaucracy as an organizational form represented an effort to make people and their knowledge into interchangeable parts of an organization.

The reductionist approach of the 20th century was focused on allowing humans to control and direct the organization of matter and of systems; it was not focused on the self-organizing behavior of systems or groups. This "Machine Age" zeitgeist of the 20th century probably explains both why some of Extension's social initiatives faded away and also why they were overlooked by historians writing during that century.

The 21st century, becoming known as the Knowledge Era, will require new kinds of emergent, self-organizing social behavior, like interdisciplinary collaboration. People most fully share their knowledge with people whom they most fully trust. To be most effective, people will need to know how to earn and build trust with new cohorts of people on an ongoing basis. Trustworthy institutions and organizations will make it easier for individuals to establish trusting relationships within them. The Social Center Movement (and the Schools as Social Center Movement) was focused on creating conditions that would allow citizens to come together to form bonds and build trust, so that they could whole-heartedly engage in the self-organizing system we call self-governance.

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(29) Early Definition of Social Capital

Social Capital is a hot topic among academics in 2011. The fields of economics, education, sociology and political science are all currently attempting to use this concept and to be the first to fully define and solidify it as a reliable and useable academic construct.

Today, social capital can loosely be defined as the value (or power, or efficacy) that is gained by a group of individuals when they have established relationship ties among themselves. The social capital resides in the ties themselves, rather than in the individuals. Most definitions suggest that no single person “owns” social capital; it is generally said to exist only in relationship.

The strength of the ties is an issue under study, specifically whether “weak ties” or “strong ties” make more of a difference and under which circumstances. The direction of the ties is also being studied. “Bonding social capital” describes an inward-reaching set of relationships, in which people who are most alike or already have clearly defined shared interests, beginning with family members, form relationship ties. “Bridging social capital” describes an outward-reaching network of relationships, in which people develop personal connections beyond their own immediate family or interest group.

“Bridging Social Capital” would be the best description of what the Social Center Movement was seeking to develop. Though most academic treatments of this concept don’t include it as part of the lineage of the concept, one of the earliest attempts to define social capital grew directly out of the Social Center Movement.

In 1916, Lyda J. Hanifan, the State Supervisor of Rural Schools in Charleston, W. Va., wrote an article entitled, “The Rural School Community Center.” It would become so popular as a pamphlet that he would expand it into a book in 1920 entitled, *The Community Center*.

In the 1916 article, Hanifan offers this definition:

In the use of the phrase social capital I make no reference to the usual acceptance of the term capital, except in a figurative sense. I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or to cold cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely, good-will, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit, the rural community, whose logical center is the school. In community building as in business organization and expansion there must be an accumulation of capital before constructive work can be done. In building up a large business enterprise of modern proportions, there must first be an accumulation of capital from a large number of individuals. When the financial resources of these several individuals have been brought together under effective organization and skillful management, they take the form of a business corporation whose purpose is to produce an article of consumption-

steel, copper, bread, clothing -or to provide personal conveniences- transportation, electricity, thoroughfares. The people benefit by having such products and conveniences available for their daily needs, while the capitalists benefit from the profits reserved to themselves as compensation for their services to society.

Now, we may easily pass from the business corporation over to the social corporation, the community, and find many points of similarity. The individual is helpless socially, if left entirely to himself. Even the association of the members of one's own family fails to satisfy that desire which every normal individual has of being with his fellows, of being a part of a larger group than the family. If he may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors. First, then, there must be an accumulation of community social capital. Such accumulation may be effected by means of public entertainments, "sociables," picnics and a variety of other community gatherings.

When the people of a given community have become acquainted with one another and have formed a habit of coming together upon occasions for entertainment, social intercourse and personal enjoyment, that is, when sufficient social capital has been accumulated, then by skillful leadership this social capital may easily be directed towards the general improvement of the community well-being. That there is today almost a total lack of such social capital in rural districts throughout the country need not be retold in this article. Everybody who has made either careful study or close observations of country life conditions knows that to be true. Of rural social surveys there have perhaps been a plenty for the present. The important question now is, "How may these conditions be made better?"

A STORY OF ACHIEVEMENT

The story which follows is a concrete example of how a rural community of West Virginia in a single year actually developed social capital and then used this capital in the general improvement of its recreational, intellectual, moral and economic conditions....

...CONCLUSIONS

The reader may question the propriety of discussing such subjects as community surveys, school attendance, evening classes,

and good roads in an article whose title is "The Rural School Community Center." I will admit that they are subjects not generally thought of in connection with community center work. Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that the supervisor and teachers, whose achievements I have described, have struck bed-rock in community building. It is not what they did for the people that counts for most in what was achieved; it was what they led the people to do for themselves that was really important. Tell the people what they ought to do, and they will say in effect, "Mind your own business." But help them to discover for themselves what ought to be done and they will not be satisfied until it is done. First the people must get together. Social capital must be accumulated. Then community improvements may begin. The more the people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the investment. (pp. 130-131)

From "The Rural School Community Center" by Lyda J. Hanifan
Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, V. 67, New
 Possibilities in Education Issue, September 1916.

WISCONSIN CONNECTIONS TO HANIFAN'S DEFINITION

We should note that in Hanifan's bibliography, he cites Edward J. Ward's book, *The Social Center* (1913) and "Bulletin #18: Social and Civic Center Work in Country" from the Department of Education, Madison, WI. Coincidentally, another article published in the same issue of this journal is one by Louis E. Reber, the first Director of the Division of University Extension of the University of Wisconsin. Not surprisingly, Reber's article is entitled, "University Extension."

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(30) Efficiency vs. Effectiveness

The Progressive Movement was in line with the Machine Age in terms of an admiration for “efficiency.” But they also considered passion, spirit and connectedness as key to making society work.

In 1913, Van Hise, McCarthy & others traveled to Philadelphia, both to return a visit made to Madison by over 100 members of the Philadelphia Civics Club earlier that year, and to tour several “model” factories with F. W. Taylor, inventor of “Scientific Management.”

Taylor was considered the premier “efficiency expert” of his time, but has also been criticized for treating humans more as machine parts than as humans. His method was to take each job and break each step down into the smallest, most mindless parts. It was then easy to teach the job to any worker. Taylor aimed to eliminate a need for “skill” on the part of the worker, because skill differentiated workers. This way, workers would be interchangeable parts, just like the rest of the machine. Taylor’s goal was to make thinking unnecessary for the line worker. In Taylor’s view, thinking was for managers only.

It must have been fascinating to see the faces of the Wisconsinites touring with Taylor. The Wisconsin Idea was about ensuring that people could think for themselves and govern themselves, and that they could become as skilled in their chosen field as possible.

Whereas the case can be made that “Taylorism” and its corollary, “Fordism,” did in the end, dominate the 20th Century, it is salient to note that while the early Progressives were seeking efficiency along with everyone else, they were also seeking effectiveness through human connection.

Ida Clyde Clarke wrote a book during World War I that was published just around the time the war ended. By then, the Social Center movement had been renamed the Community Center movement. The following excerpt spells it out.

From p. 12-14 of *The Little Democracy* by Ida Clyde Clarke (available on Google books):

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMUNITY MOVEMENT. The Community Center Movement does not aim merely to increase efficiency measured by the standards of the factory and machine industry. “Human beings,” said John Collier, President of the National Community Center Association, “are not to be dealt with as if they were passive material, like iron ore or cotton thread, which can be taken and put in a machine and hammered or woven and put through specialized processes and turned out at the end a finished product. Unconsciously we have modeled our governmental efficiency on the efficiency which has characterized the nineteenth century, which is the efficient production of wealth, of goods; of course goods have no memories, no hopes, no rights, no souls. See those highly complicated welfare activities threading their way among the people; see the unconsciousness of the people as they are operated upon by the truant officer, by employment agent, by protective devices of one kind or another; see their unconsciousness as they are touched

here and touched there by these highly efficient and highly specialized ministrations of government, and see if the picture of the people as being mere passive material does not hold good. The people are not conscious of what the government is aiming at. The development of our centralized welfare work in government and private social service is being carried out on machine patterns, and we must discover some way by which to bring all these purposes of government to bear on the personality of the common man, which means all of us. We must find some way to enlist a passionate and personal response from the individual so that he will, as he alone can do, shape himself through cooperating in the common purpose.”

The Community Center Movement seems to answer this need, for its underlying purpose is to bring the mass of people into day to day working relations with constructive operations of the government. This of course establishes a very important relationship between the Community Center and the whole problem of government. The Community Center proposes that the people should govern themselves; it asserts that there are vast stores of unreleased energy in every neighborhood; and that the organization of the neighborhood is the power that helps release these energies to the interest of the whole society.

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(31) The Social Center and Self-Governance

From an article entitled "A State-wide Forum" in *The Independent* magazine, v. 76, p. 245 November 6, 1913:

Why so many of the new political ideas originate in Wisconsin or are there first put into effect has been a mystery to many people. The mystery is in large part explained when we understand what an active part the state university takes in public affairs and how thoroly [sic] the state is organized for the discussion of matters of common interest. The schoolhouses in each locality serve as polling place, lecture hall, library, recreation house and popular forum....

... All this is a part of the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, which provides programs for the social evenings, prepares briefs for the debates, sends out books, and what is more, important clippings on both sides of the questions discust [sic], and furnishes on demand speakers competent to lecture on hogs, pragmatism, municipal ownership, Botticelli, or any other subject desired by the community. ***The aim of the movement is nothing less than the education of the people as a whole, the awakening of local life and the public ownership of politics.*** [emphasis added]

From p. 207 of *The Social Center* (1913) by E.J. Ward:

In the program of complete social center development the use of the schoolhouse as a public lecture center is an important element. In many cities this extension of the use of school buildings has begun, but nowhere else in the world has so large a public lecture system been developed as in New York City. In Rochester, where the basic organization of the citizens in the several districts made possible the people's having a voice in the selection of the speakers and the topics to be presented, the attendance at each public lecture averaged nearly a third more than in New York City, and thus it was demonstrated that the use of the schoolhouse as a lecture center will be most successful only as it is made a part of a democratically controlled and comprehensive focusing of community activities, instead of being developed autocratically by an independent educational provision as in New York and elsewhere.

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(32) Zona Gale and “A Social Center Pageant”

The first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Miss Zona Gale was a high-profile Wisconsinite, who served as a UW Regent. She was also involved in the Social Center Movement, along with UW's Extension Division.

- Zona Gale was born in Portage, Wisconsin. An **1895** graduate of UW, Gale went on to become a professional writer, publishing in a wide variety of magazines. In **1908**, she gains fame with a series of short stories about a fictional town called “Friendship Village.” Gale becomes active in the Women’s Civic Club Movement, taking a national leadership role. She also becomes active in the Social Center Movement, and in **1914** is supposed to become a writer for a new magazine, to be published in Madison, entitled *The Social Center Magazine*. Other potential writers were to be Margaret Woodrow Wilson (daughter of the sitting President of the U.S.); Edward J. Ward, Advisor on Social and Civic Center Development for University of Wisconsin’s Extension Division; and Frederick C. Howe, author of *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* (1912). [It is unclear whether this magazine was ever published under this title.]
- In **1914**, Sauk City, WI stages “**A Social Center Pageant**” attended by four thousand people, many of whom arrive by train. “Pageants” at the time did not refer to beauty contests. Instead, they were dramatized tableaux, in which large numbers of costumed actors portrayed historic or morality tales. There were huge numbers of participants and huge audiences.

Sauk City’s Pageant was a celebration of that city’s decision to fully adopt the structure of the school as Social Center. Additionally, they were the first community in the nation to fully adopt the structure in which the Principal of the school became the official “Civic Secretary” of the community – a position for which he (M.T. Buckley) was paid. (A two-part conference had been held in Madison in June and July of that year, to discuss the need for establishing Civic Secretary positions in school social centers, and the need for paying the staff). Miss Ethel Rockwell of U.W. Extension’s Community Theater department directed the Pageant, **assisted by Zona Gale**. Edward Ward’s wife served as the director of dance for the production. Ward and his wife were in attendance, and can be identified in a panoramic photo taken of the cast and crew. (Photo can be found at Prairie de Sac Historical Society/Tripp Museum.)

Harper’s Weekly for **November 21, 1914** covered the Pageant, in an article entitled, “America’s Foremost City.” The title refers to their vanguard position in deciding to pay the Principal to serve as Civic Secretary. The article begins,

On October 3, 1914, about four thousand men, women and children in the town of Sauk City, Wisconsin, gave over the whole sunny day to a pageant interpretation of events as richly significant as the rifle shot at Concord or the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The Principal of the high school had been named as Civic Secretary, and the municipal government had authorized the removal of the ballot box from the town hall to the school house.

Other communities have appreciated the value of the wider use of school buildings, and the social centre movement is having a splendid sweep, but Sauk City is the first to grasp the important idea that the school teacher should be given special recognition and added pay as the hired man of the committee-of-the-whole citizenship.

Other communities have begun to use the school house as a voting place, but their reasons have been those of economy. Sauk City proclaims the new theory that the business of citizenship and the business of education constitute one process, and that the appropriate place for the men of the town to express their rights and duties as citizens is where the future citizens are being trained...

The ballot box was ceremonially carried into the school house, on the shoulders of the town leaders.

- **1920**, publishes *Miss Lulu Bett*, a novel which became very popular. She turns it into a play.
- **1921**, is first woman to ever win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, for *Miss Lulu Bett*
- **1923-29**, Serves as UW Regent
 - Helps to recruit Glenn Frank as UW President
 - Frank brings Alexander Micklejohn to establish the Experimental College

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(33) The J. Stephens Tripp Bequest

Copied from the internet and pasted below is an article written in 1951, about a “mysterious” bequest given to the University during the time that Charles Van Hise was President.

From Priebe, Dick (ed.) / *Wisconsin alumnus*, Volume 52, Number 5 (Feb. 1951)
Badger bookshelf, p. 19:

The Inspired Gift ...

A \$600,000 Walk

BACK NEAR the turn of the century, an elderly gentleman took a walk about the Wisconsin campus. He spent the entire day on the campus, watching, listening. It was more than the physical attractiveness of the buildings and the landscape that interested him. He was finding out about the spirit of Wisconsin, that vital, moving force called the Wisconsin Idea.

\$600,000 Bequest

He was not a graduate of the University, but when he returned to his home in nearby Sauk county that night, he knew he wanted to have a part in the future of this school and its spirit of educational progress.

No one at the University learned about his decision or his campus visit until several years later, in 1915, when the old gentleman, J. Stephen Tripp, died.

His will left most of his estate, approximately \$600,000, to the University. Startled officials, who could discover no connection between J. Stephen Tripp and the school, investigated. They knew that Mr. Tripp had been one of the most esteemed citizens of Sauk county. He had served in the state Legislature. He had been postmaster at Sauk City for seven years and town clerk of Prairie du Sac for 16. He had been president of Sauk City village for eight years, president of the village of

Prairie du Sac for 20 years and a member of the Sauk county board of supervisors for 15.

Inspired by Vilas

They discovered that his interest in Wisconsin had been aroused when he read the will of Col. William F. Vilas, who had left his entire \$3,000,000 estate to the University. J. Stephen Tripp had wondered what there was about Wisconsin that could inspire such loyalty. He had found out during his campus walk.

The Board of Regents acquired the Tripp funds in 1924. From them were built Tripp hall, a dormitory, and Tripp Commons in the Union. A scholarship was established. And from remaining real estate holdings, the University acquired 1,200 acres of land for the arboretum project, valued in excess of \$2,000,000.

See the digitized article as it appeared in the magazine at:

<http://images.library.wisc.edu/UW/EFacs/WIAlumMag/v52i5/M/0019.jpg>

Given that Mr. Tripp died in 1915, it is worth noting that in 1914, the town of Sauk City held an event that drew 4,000 people to town. It was a community theater event produced in cooperation with UW Extension, a play entitled, "A Social Center Pageant." See [\(32\) Zona Gale and the Social Center Movement](#) for more detail.

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[\(34\) Excerpt from Van Hise's Presidential Inaugural Address of 1904](#)

Van Hise's Inauguration Speech spells out the need for social connection on campus; and nearly the same words show up a few years later, in the social center movement.

The professor in the classroom and the laboratory can do much for a student, and especially he can do much if he believes that one of the highest functions of a professor is that of a comrade. But, when a student goes out into the world, **there is no other part of his education which is of such fundamental importance as his capacity to deal with men, to see the other fellow's point of view, to have sympathetic appreciation with all that may be good in that point view, and yet to retain firmly his own ideas and to adjust the two in fair proportion.** [emphasis added] Nothing that the professor or the laboratory can do for the student can take the place of daily close companionship with hundreds of his fellows. In the intimate communal life of the dormitories he must adjust himself to others. He must be genial, fair, likeable, or else his lot is rightly a hard one. This fundamental training in adaptability to and appreciation of his fellows can only come from attrition between a large number of human units. These are the reasons, understood without statement by Englishmen, which makes them adhere to the Oxford and Cambridge system... If the University of Wisconsin is to do for the sons of the state what Oxford and Cambridge are doing for the sons of England, if it is to do even what the eastern institutions are accomplishing for their students, not only in producing scholars and investigators, but in making men, it must once more have halls of residence, and to these must be added a commons and a union.

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(35) Social Centers On Campus

When it comes to his ideas about the benefits of socializing, in both democracy and education, Charles Van Hise seems to have been influenced by his own educational experiences, along with people and ideas from the Progressive Movement.

In his famous Inaugural Speech, he called for the creation of a system of social venues on the campus, and stressed the importance of mentoring and social interaction. He argues that the way Oxford and Cambridge structure their educational experience for students is certainly not “efficient,” but it certainly is one of the most effective educational experiences in the world. Living together, eating together, playing sports together as well as studying together creates a powerful learning opportunity.

About his plans for Wisconsin, Van Hise says,

The professor in the classroom and laboratory can *do much for a student, and especially he can do much if he* believes that one of the highest functions of a professor is that of a comrade. But, when a student goes out into the world, there is no other part of his education which is of such fundamental importance as his capacity to deal with men, to see the other fellow’s point of view, to have sympathetic appreciation with all that may be good in that point of view, and yet to retain firmly his own ideas and to adjust the two in fair proportion. Nothing that the professor or the laboratory can do for the student can take the place of daily close companionship with hundreds of his fellows. In the intimate communal life of the dormitories he must adjust himself to others. He must be genial, fair, likable, or else his lot is rightly a hard one. This fundamental training in adaptability to and appreciation of his fellows can only come from attrition between a large number of human units. These are the reasons, understood without statement by Englishmen, which makes them adhere to the Oxford and Cambridge system [of communal living and socializing in the colleges]...

If the University of Wisconsin is to do for the sons of the state what Oxford and Cambridge are doing for the sons of England, if it is to do even what the eastern institutions are accomplishing for their students, not only in producing scholars and investigators, but in making men, it must once more have halls of residence, and to these must be added a commons and a union. At the commons, the men meet one another each day; at the union they adjourn for close, wholesome social intercourse. The union should be a commodious and beautiful building, comfortably, even artistically, furnished. When the students are done with their work in the evening, the attractive union is at hand, where refreshments may be had, and a pleasant hour may be spent at games, with the magazines, in a novel or in social chat. The coarse attractions of the town have little power in comparison.

MENTORING

In Van Hise's own life, Roland Irving, a professor of Mining and Metallurgy, served as a mentor. Irving became Director of the Wisconsin Geological Survey, and Van Hise later worked for him there. When Irving died unexpectedly in 1888, Van Hise succeeded him in that role.

Van Hise had seen a similar mentoring relationship in his friend Fred Turner's life. As an undergraduate, Turner had been a student of History professor William F. Allen, even assisting Allen with instruction. With Allen's encouragement, Turner took his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins, since advanced degrees in History were not yet awarded at Wisconsin. Turner would return to Madison to join the History faculty himself.

A UNION

Van Hise reportedly stuttered as a child. However, when he was at the University, he joined a debating club and eventually became a prize-winning debater. At Oxford and Cambridge, the "union" was the organization comprised of the debating societies. The union that Van Hise describes in his speech is already beginning to sound more expansive, more like the models soon to be suggested by proponents of the Social Center Movement. When the Memorial Union opened, it included a "Commons Wing" where dining rooms were located, such as Tripp Commons and the Georgian Grill.

HALLS OF RESIDENCE

Van Hise and La Follette were undergraduates during an era when South Hall was used as a dormitory for men. Some faculty lived there as well. But in 1884, when Science Hall burned to the ground, the UW began holding classes in South Hall. UW Men would not have halls of residence available to them on campus until after World War I, when the new "Van Hise Residence Halls" would open on the lake shore, nearly a decade after Van Hise's death.

DR. HAROLD BRADLEY

Though Van Hise made his Inauguration Speech in 1904 and he didn't hire Harold Bradley to establish a department of medical chemistry (the early foundations of the Medical School) until 1906, Bradley would become the living embodiment of the social vision for education that Van Hise advocated.

Bradley became a great friend to students. Early in his career at Madison, Bradley married a student and they had a long and happy marriage. Doc Bradley remained dedicated to students throughout his career.

He was the Faculty representative on the committee to build the men's residence halls AND the committee to build the Memorial Union. He was even on the committee that recommended to the Regents that the Lakeshore Path (which had previously been a fairly random, albeit popular, footpath) be graded so as to better connect the new men's residence halls with the new Union building. He

helped to establish the official student governance of the Wisconsin Union as we know it today. He also helped to establish the ground-breaking “House Fellow” program, in which older students would provide leadership for younger students in the residence halls. This was a break from the “House Mother” model, and was meant as an advance toward self-governance for the students. Bradley helped Union Director Porter Butts establish an outdoors club called “Hoofers,” and he helped the Hoofers to build a ski jump on Muir Knoll.

Bradley made many other major contributions to the University, but he was an outstanding example of the kind of faculty member that Van Hise had hoped for with regard to students’ lives. Though Van Hise died unexpectedly in 1918, Bradley carried his vision regarding social education forward with integrity.

THE SOCIAL CENTER MOVEMENT AND THE WISCONSIN UNION

The structure and philosophy of self-governance for the Wisconsin Union that was developed by the committee that Bradley chaired was deeply reflective of that espoused by the Wisconsin contingent of the Social Center Movement. Indeed, the idea that “active members” are the ones who pay membership fees, but that the association is for the benefit of the entire population of the University could have been lifted directly from the articles of incorporation issued by the Social Center Association of America in 1911, after the conference held in the Red Gym.

The concept that a paid professional – a Director – would serve as a steward to provide stability and continuity while answering to a self-governing body and ensuring that their decisions were enacted was articulated by the Social Center folks in Wisconsin long before it was adopted by the Wisconsin Union.

The idea of bringing together art galleries, lectures, debates, concerts, movies, libraries, refreshments, games, recreation – and the ballot box – to draw the entire community into one place was strongly advocated by the folks in University Extension. They were advocating making the common schools the common meeting places. In the case of a school itself, the Union became the Community Center.

Porter Butts, the first Director of the Wisconsin Union, wrote a book upon his retirement, entitled *The College Union Idea*. In his book, Mr. Butts frequently refers to the Union as the University’s community center. If one doesn’t know the history of the UW’s involvement with the development of the very concept of community centers, one can miss the very direct connection to the Wisconsin Idea. And if one has a notion of community centers that was acquired in another state, one might miss the very central importance of self-governance that has kept the Wisconsin Union so vibrant over the decades.

The official motto of the Wisconsin Union is “Societate Crescit Lumen” which roughly translates to “Light is increased by human relationships.” If light refers to understanding, then relationships make more of it. See [\(25\) Service of Power and Light to All the State](#). Social capital expands the potential of intellectual capital. This concept seems to describe the notions of the 21st century Knowledge Economy, yet it is institutionalized at Wisconsin during the early 20th.

VAN HISE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Every summer for the 10 years before he was appointed President of the UW, Van Hise taught geology for the summer quarter at the brand new University of Chicago. That University had “poached” the sitting President of the University of Wisconsin – Thomas C. Chamberlin – to start its new department of Geology in 1892. Chamberlin made the offer to Van Hise, who had just completed his Ph.D. in Geology at Wisconsin.

When Van Hise was Inaugurated as President in 1904, Jane Addams (the founder of the famous Hull House Settlement) and John Dewey (one of the first people on record using the word “social capital,” in the context of the schools-as-social-centers discussion no less) were among the recipients of Honorary Doctorates.

It is interesting to note that Hull House had a policy of checking out paintings for people to hang in their own residences, at no charge. The Wisconsin Union has acquired an extensive art collection over the years, and they operated a free service through which people could check out paintings and drawings to hang in their own homes and enjoy.

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[\(36\) "Common Ground"](#)

Finding common ground was a frequently used theme among people writing about the Social Center Movement. Edward J. Ward, UW-Extension's Advisor on Social and Civic Center Development, uses the same theme.

But the town hall is gone...there must be some place to which we may turn as a nation for mediation and communion, some common ground where we may stand, and, finding our common mind, speak it in the common voice. For there is a wisdom deeper than that written in any books. The common mind holds the wisdom of all books. (pp. 41-42)

from *The Social Center* (1913) by EJ Ward

"Common Ground" would not be a term one would use to discuss simply getting together with people who are most like you, say your friends and family ("bonding social capital"), but for getting together with people who are different from you ("bridging social capital").

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(37) The Settlement Movement and its Influence on the Social Center Movement

The Settlement Movement overlapped with the Social Center Movement. They shared some similar goals, but the Social Center Movement aimed to be more central to the entire society.

THE SETTLEMENT MOVEMENT IN CHICAGO

Jane Addams, the renowned reformer and American leader in the Settlement movement, founded the famous Settlement named Hull House, in Chicago in 1889. She had visited Toynbee Hall, the first settlement in London, in 1887.

Settlements were places in which privileged university students went and lived among the poor in the overcrowded cities, and demonstrated to them in person how to live a better life and make something of themselves. Students were supposed to be learning life lessons from the poor as well as teaching them the life skills of the higher classes, so in some ways, this was an example of what we might call “service learning” today. In the U.S., this movement coincided with the massive influx of immigrants from around the world, and U.S. university students were often showing foreigners how to “become good Americans.” In both cases, the benevolence was paternalistic and class-conscious. The approach was popularly known as “Uplift.”

AWARENESS IN MADISON

Leaders at UW-Madison were well-aware of the Settlement movement in Chicago. Back in Madison, a UW Master’s Thesis written in 1897, entitled “The Social Settlement Movement in Chicago” by Josephine Hunt Raymond, is signed at the end by two UW faculty members: Richard T. Ely and Frederick Jackson Turner. (It’s still shelved in Memorial Library.) Also, from 1893-1903, Charles Van Hise taught geology each summer quarter at the brand new University of Chicago, and it may be that this is when he met Jane Addams.

During the UW Commencement of 1904, which overlapped with the Jubilee 50th Anniversary Celebration of the University and the Inauguration of Charles Van Hise as President of UW, several Honorary Doctorates were awarded. At least two people from Chicago were recipients. Jane Addams, Settlement pioneer was one; John Dewey, advocate of schools as social centers was another.

One of the traditions that may have carried over from the Settlements to the Social Centers was the practice of checking out paintings and drawings – on free loan, as if from a public library – for people to hang in their living areas, so as to learn to appreciate art. Hull House followed this practice. The Memorial Union, the Social Center established within our own campus, featured a similar art check-out service for decades. (Of course, the Wisconsin Union’s first director, Porter Butts, was also one of the first students to get a Master’s degree in Art History from UW-Madison.)

DEMOCRACY OVER PATERNALISM

One Settlement tradition that seems to have been left behind by the Social Center movement, at least for those in the middle-west, is the “uplift” approach. “Us-lift” would better describe their aims than “up-lift.” The two excerpts below illustrate this point.

- 1) From **“New Uses for the Public School: Committee on School Extension Reports to the Convention of the National Municipal League at Buffalo on the Schools as a Social Asset”** - pp. 7-8, *La Follette’s Magazine*, V. 2, #52, December 31, 1910:

This report lists a series of papers presented about potential uses of the public school houses as social centers. They cover potential uses from movie screenings, branch libraries, recreation centers, health offices, free lecture center, art galleries and non-partisan political headquarters, where citizens can debate and discuss the issues of the day. The Settlement houses provided the model of a broad range of social and enrichment activities, offered on a daily basis so that people could really get to know each other. The old New England Town Hall Meeting provided the model of egalitarian, democratic debate of issues of concern to citizens. The Social Center movement envisioned a new model, drawing from both. From the article:

Robert A. Woods of South End House, Boston, writing on ‘The Relation of the Settlement to the Social Center,’ shows that, as in other social development, the settlement furnishes simply the pioneering experiment station, blazing the way for the broader and more democratic developments in connection with the public school building.

At the same meeting, UW Extension was represented:

In a paper on “The Relation of the Social Center to the University,” Professor Louis E. Reber, Dean of the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin, gave the various ways in which, through local social center development, the various communities make take advantage of the resources of the University in lectures, discussion material, selected libraries, moving picture films and lantern slides.

- 2) From pp. 205-206 ***The Social Center (1913)*** by Edward J. Ward, describing “The First National Conference on Social and Civic Center Development,” held on the UW campus, in the Red Gym, in 1911:

At this meeting, two ideas of developing the full use of the schoolhouse, the paternal, by which the public servants manage the people, and the democratic, by which the citizens use these buildings to direct the government, were brought into direct and clear contrast by the proposal of a delegation from

New York City that the constitution of the national association to be formed should embody the uplift spirit of the New York movement, and the proposal of the western men and women that the movement should be frankly democratic in its aim. After a full discussion, it was finally agreed that out of this meeting should develop "The Social Center Association of America," whose purpose should be to "promote the development of intelligent public spirit through community use of the common schoolhouse – *for free discussion of public questions* and all wholesome, civic, educational and recreational activities."

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[\(38\) Social Connections, Trust and Democracy](#)

Quote taken from a report on the Forty-first National Conference of Charities and Corrections, held at Memphis, Tennessee, May 6-15, 1914:

The large place of recreation in the movement toward democracy was the main emphasis of the committee on neighborhood development. Right to leisure and use of leisure were considered in their bearing not merely on each individual's "pursuit of happiness," but ***on the development of citizens' and neighbors' faculties for knowing, trusting and working with each other – so essential in progress toward real democracy.***

[Emphasis added. This quote is given in a discussion of the Social Center movement.]

As reported in *The Survey* magazine, May 30, 1914 (V. 32, No. 9, p. 236)

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(39) The Social Center Movement

The notion that the Wisconsin Idea emerged as an attempt to create a stable ecosystem balanced to support democracy is supported by the involvement of many of its founders in the “Social Center Movement.” The Social Center Movement in Wisconsin was an attempt to combine people, place and ideas to create “bridging” social capital and strong capacity for self-governance.

La Follette’s emphasis on truth and transparency in government, Van Hise’s emphasis on academic freedom and untrammelled verification of facts, McCarthy’s emphasis on getting verified factual information to legislators who were making decisions, were complemented by their efforts to bring citizens together to get to know each other, learn the range of points of view of their fellow citizens and build social capital together that would allow them to enact the most effective democracy possible.

NATIONWIDE

The Social Center Movement was a part of the overall Progressive Movement. Nationwide, it was an effort to help communities identify or create a place at the heart of their community where people could meet each other, get to know each other’s points of view, and identify their “common ground.” All sorts of activities and services were brought together in one place, so as to draw the widest range of citizens to linger and interact there. Everything from libraries and art galleries to movies and dances might be included in a Social Center’s activities. The thought was that when people have gotten to know each other, face to face, through relaxing and fun activities, they would be more willing to engage fairly with one another when more serious or even difficult topics needed to be discussed. The goal was to create what we would today call “bridging social capital” that would enable community groups to effectively enact a democracy that included everyone’s voice and advanced everyone’s interests. In many communities around the nation, Social Centers also included some of the “uplift” sentiment of the Settlement House Movement. In this line of thinking, the “less fortunate” could come to the Social Centers to get what they needed to elevate themselves to become suitable Americans. Whereas Wisconsin did participate in the Settlement movement, and whereas immigrant “uplift” was part of the social work scene in the State, these were not the driving forces in Wisconsin’s Social Center approach.

WISCONSIN’S VERSION

Wisconsin’s contingent expressly rejected the “uplift” approach for the new Social Centers they envisioned. In Wisconsin, Social Centers would be focused on grassroots democracy, with the emphasis on self-governance. Citizens would discuss issues and

attempt to gain community consensus. They would then make their wishes known to their elected officials, who would enact the will of the people. These grassroots groups, based on non-partisan discussion, would pass their decisions upward to the State level and eventually the Federal. “Uplift” would not be an appropriate term to describe this focus – “Us-lift” might have been.

In Wisconsin, the emphasis on nurturing grassroots democracy was combined with the notion that the schools were at the heart of any community, both geographically and emotionally, so they were the logical places where these Social Centers should be established. The Wisconsin Idea was the vision that education and self-governance went hand-in-hand, so this was not a surprising implementation strategy to emerge from Wisconsin.

Edward J. Ward clearly believed that the development of social centers is a direct outgrowth of the Wisconsin Idea, as we can see from this quote from his book, *The Social Center* (1913):

The fact is that while the strong meat of democracy was proving too much for the digestion of Rochester, it had begun to be the regular diet of Wisconsin and other progressive states. Indeed the social center idea is just another way of saying the "Wisconsin idea," just the expression in the local neighborhood of the method of fully using the public educational apparatus which on the larger scale of the commonwealth had begun to make the University of Wisconsin the leader among Universities. (p. 203)

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN’S EXTENSION DIVISION

Edward J. Ward, a Presbyterian minister and Progressive reformer, was recruited by Wisconsin’s Extension Division from Rochester, New York, where he had begun some of the first Social Centers in America.

In mid-November of 1910, the Convention of the National Municipal League was held in Buffalo, New York, and their Committee on School Extension made a report there. An article about the presentations there was prominently featured in an article entitled “New Uses for the Public School,” in *La Follette’s Magazine* of December 31, 1910. Ward, already gaining recognition as a leader in the Social Center Movement, was featured – and pictured - front and center. *La Follette’s Magazine* listed the names of many people who presented papers on the topic of Social Centers in the schools, but one stands out in regard to the Wisconsin Idea:

In a paper on “The Relation of the Social Center to the University,” Professor Louis E. Reber, Dean of the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin, gave the various ways in which, through social center development, the various

communities may take advantage of the resources of the University in lectures, discussion material, selected libraries, moving picture films and lantern slides.

Shortly thereafter, Ward came to Wisconsin to become the Advisor for the Bureau of Social and Civic Center Development within University Extension. It is possible that this conference may have been where Ward and Reber met.

In the Legislative session of 1911 (the one about which McCarthy wrote his book, *The Wisconsin Idea*, in 1912), legislation was passed that required public schools to allow citizen groups to use the school buildings in the off-hours, for non-partisan gatherings. The beginnings of the schools-as-Social-Centers movement in Wisconsin were established.

On October 27, 1911, Ward, under the auspices of Extension, convened the "First National Conference on Social and Civic Center Development," which was held on the Madison campus, in the Armory building – now known as the Red Gym. Many papers were presented at this meeting as well. (One that shows an especially strong connection to the Wisconsin Idea was "The Schoolhouse as a Legislative Reference Bureau" by Charles McCarthy, Ph.D., Chief, Wisconsin Legislative Reference Library.") From this meeting, an organization known as The Social Center Association of America was formed. Ward's book, *The Social Center*, discusses this conference and was published in 1913. La Follette's magazine reported on the conference, including an article from Charles Van Hise about the importance of continuing education. Nationwide, it was being discovered that social centers tended to drift and falter unless there was someone who served as paid staff to keep logistics organized. Conversely, it was also becoming apparent that when a social center had a group (paid or unpaid) who took it upon themselves to decide what to offer as activities and then produced and presented the activities, community interest tended to fall off. It was only in the instances in which the community directly made the decisions about all activities, but with the logistical stewardship and continuity of paid staff, that Social Centers thrived. It would be necessary to pursue a sort of facilitated self-governance. In Wisconsin's model of schools as social centers, it soon became clear that this stewardship would best be exercised by the Principal of the school.

On July 2 and 3 of 1914, the "First Conference on Civic Secretaryship as Public Service" was held in Madison, in the State Capitol building. C.P. Cary, the State Superintendent of Schools was involved in organizing it. "Civic Secretary" was the title that had evolved by this time to describe the responsibility that some communities were officially transferring to the Principals of their schools. It suggests a facilitative or stewardship form of leadership, and it carried with it a small bump in pay for the Principal to recognize the expanded scope of work.

In an article entitled "America's Foremost City," Harper's magazine of November 21, 1914 reports that the first town in the nation to adopt both the "Civic Secretary" title and the official pay increase for the Principal was Sauk City, Wisconsin. They reported on this new scope of work for the Principal because it was accompanied by an extremely elaborate civic celebration, photos of which are featured in the magazine.

On October 3, 1914, Sauk City staged "A Social Center Pageant" and Harper's reports that four thousand people attended it. "Pageants" were very popular in 1914. Today, the word calls to mind beauty contests, but in 1914 a pageant referred to a very large-scale re-enactment of historic events, complete with scripts, dancing and object lessons. The casts were huge, as were the audiences. Both included participants in a wide range of ages and occupations. This was truly civic theater.

After some historical re-enactments illustrating the various groups who had lived in the area, from the Native American Sac and Fox nations to the current English, Austrian and German settlers, Sauk City's Pageant involved officially conferring the title of "Civic Secretary" on Principal M.T. Buckley. He led a parade of the children through the park and into the schoolhouse, along with the town officials, who carry the town's ballot box on their shoulders, to be formally installed in the school, so as to make the school the official polling place for the citizens.

Zona Gale, the first woman ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, was also involved with the Social Center movement. She assisted Ethel Rockwell, UW Extension's specialist in Community Theater, in directing "A Social Center Pageant" in Sauk City. Edward J. Ward's wife was the director of dance for the production. Ward and his wife are identified in a panoramic photo taken of the cast and organizers.

While this seems like a high point for the Social Center movement, it was also a turning point driven by outside factors. Also in 1914, World War I began; the U.S. didn't enter the war until 1917. In 1914, a conservative backlash to the Progressives in Wisconsin saw the election of conservative governor Emanuel Philipp.

In 1915, Ward was recruited by the US Bureau of Education to begin the work of expanding the social center movement on a national scope. An article in *The Survey* magazine of November 20, 1915 says,

"PERSONALS" New national emphasis was given to the social center movement when the federal Bureau of Education drafted from Wisconsin the man whose work in this field in Rochester for three years and at the University of Wisconsin during the last five years, has attracted country-wide attention. Community organization is the designated work which Edward J. Ward will undertake as a member of the staff of the Bureau of Education, beginning January 1.

The high tide of the movement in Wisconsin was shown at a community center conference which on November 5 crowded the 10,000 seats of the Milwaukee auditorium. The meeting was a feature of the convention of the State Teachers Association. It was reported that 20,000 community meetings were held in Wisconsin's school houses last year, and the association has incorporated the community center in its own program. (p. 195)

Bob and Belle La Follette, Charles Van Hise, Charles McCarthy, Zona Gale (the UW alumna and famous fiction writer who later became a Regent), and Frederick C. Howe (author of *Wisconsin: an Experiment in Democracy*), Louis Reber and other Wisconsin Idea visionaries were all involved in promoting the development of Social Centers: on campus, around the state and around the nation.

During World War I, the Federal government began to use the existing social centers as a means for communicating with the people of the nation about the war effort. What started as a means of communicating upward the decisions and desires of the grassroots became a means of communicating to the grassroots.

World War I changed everything. In Wisconsin, a rift developed between Van Hise and La Follette over La Follette's stance against U.S. involvement in the war. Van Hise died a week after the war ended.

The end of World War I coincided with the Spanish Flu outbreak world-wide, and a decline in the Progressive Movement internationally. Even the City Beautiful Movement, often conflated with the Progressive Movement, sputtered and faded. In Wisconsin, the Socialists who were in charge of Milwaukee government at the time kept social centers going for decades. Edward Ward was convinced that the Social Center Movement would be a permanent new support for democracy. [\(39a\) Not Manna from Heaven But a Crop](#) After WWI, even Edward Ward changed careers out in Washington, D.C.

Still, based on this quote from his 1913 book, *The Social Center*, Ward must have felt deep disappointment at the demise of this movement:

But the town hall is gone.... there must be some place to which we may turn as a nation for mediation and communion, some common ground where we may stand, and, finding our common mind, speak it in the common voice. For there is a wisdom deeper than that written in any books. The common mind holds the wisdom of all books. (pp. 41-42)

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(39a) Not Manna from Heaven But a Crop

Though the Social Center Movement was happening in various places around the country, Wisconsin's approach (as lead by Extension) was focused on making democracy more participatory by using the common schoolhouse as the social center of a community.

In the book, *The Social Center* (1913), Edward J. Ward describes what was said by a Wisconsin legislator who travelled to Rochester, New York, where Ward (a Presbyterian Minister) had started some of the first Social Centers in the nation,

One of the visitors of the social centers in Rochester was Senator Winfield Gaylord of Wisconsin. On the occasion of his visit, he said: "This is a miracle in New York State. It is manna, which tastes good, but has no apparent connection with its environment, and I'm afraid that it won't last overnight. If this development had appeared in Wisconsin instead of New York, it would have been a crop and it would stay."

The fact is that while the strong meat of democracy was proving too much for the digestion of Rochester, it had begun to be the regular diet of Wisconsin and other progressive states. Indeed the social center idea is **just another way of saying the "Wisconsin idea,"** [emphasis added] just the expression in the local neighborhood of the method of fully using the public educational apparatus which on the larger scale of the commonwealth had begun to make the University of Wisconsin the leader among Universities. The mark of the University of Wisconsin is the splendid fact that the people, all the people throughout the state, realize that they own this institution, and that the men and women on its staff are their hired men and women. The map of Wisconsin is a picture of the campus of the University as served through its great extension division. Most universities have regarded themselves and been regarded somewhat as sacred shrines wherein is kept ever burning the lamp of knowledge and whereto devotees of abstract truth come to worship. The University of Wisconsin has led the way to the new conception that the function of the university is to serve rather as a central power house whose great dynamos produce driving force and light not only for self illumination but for service of light and power to all the state.

Recognizing that the fundamental organization of the citizenship for democratic understanding and expression through the use of the schoolhouse in each district in the state would be the means of facilitating the great movement for the state's self-service through its university, there was established, in the fall of 1910, the Bureau of Social Center Development in the Extension Division of Wisconsin....

In the autumn of 1911, there was called at Madison, under the auspices of the

University Extension Division, the First National Conference on Social Center Development.

...It was the getting together of some of us to promote the getting together of all of us in the place that belongs to all of us to do the work that no less than all of us can do....

...After a full discussion, it was finally agreed that out of this meeting should develop "The Social Center Association of America," whose purpose it should be "to promote the development of intelligent public spirit through community use of the common schoolhouse - for free discussion of public questions and all wholesome, civic, educational and recreational activities." The fundamental idea of the social center regarding its membership was also expressed in the constitution adopted by this convention, namely, that while one has to join in order to be an active member, "the members of this association are the people of the United States."

"What I see in this movement," said Governor Wilson, at this meeting in Madison, "is a recovery of the constructive and creative genius of the American people." (pp. 203-206).

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[\(40\) Quotes from Frederic C. Howe's book entitled, *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* \(1912\)](#)

Wisconsin has a spirit of service that is unique. There is nothing like it in America. It suggests the existence of an instinct for public work that we have rarely offered an opportunity to develop. Men talk about public affairs in Madison; they talk city, state, and nation, the problems of the farmer and the worker, as in no place I have ever been. (p. 41)

The close contact of the university with the state has revitalized its life. It has done much for the professors; it has done much for the students. There is an atmosphere of enthusiasm, of interest in the things that are, that is different from anything I know in any large institution of learning in America. (p. 46)

I know of no place in America where officials work with more devotion than they do in Wisconsin. There is an enthusiasm for public service that is unique. It is not confined to men from the university, it seems to animate nearly all officials. Politics is a profession in which men give the best that is in them. (p. 50)

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[\(41\) The Philadelphia Pilgrimage](#)

In May of 1913, 120 members of the Civics Club of Philadelphia got on a train together and rode west to Madison, Wisconsin for four days worth of presentations about the Wisconsin Idea. McCarthy's book of that title had come out the previous year, and already "the Wisconsin Idea" was being used to describe this phenomenon.

In his opening speech to the group, Van Hise expresses a little surprise that such a large group of people from another part of the country would show such strong interest in what was happening in Wisconsin, but he was surely getting used to the interest by this time.

In November of that year, Van Hise, McCarthy and two other people from Wisconsin visited Philadelphia in return. On this trip, they also visited F. W. Taylor and toured some "model factories" that were using his famous new concepts of "Scientific Management" to improve their efficiency.

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(42) Poem: The Wisconsin Idea as Seen By a Satirist

Wisconsin, both the State and its University, had growing reputations in the first decade of the 20th century, but achieved national celebrity status after the legislative session of 1911. In 1912, Charles McCarthy's book, *The Wisconsin Idea* was published, as was *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* by Frederic C. Howe. Charles Van Hise published *Concentration and Control* that year as well. Celebrities attract satire, and did in 1914 as well. Here's an example:

THE WISCONSIN IDEA AS SEEN BY A SATIRIST *¹
(This appeared in the number of *Life* published March 5, 1914) *²

By A.E. Robbins

O a truly sovereign state
 Is Wisconsin
 All that's good and wise and great
 Is Wisconsin.
 Every day or two I read
 How her laws and customs lead.
 Heaven must be like indeed
 To Wisconsin. *³

Education is the rage
 In Wisconsin
 People are all smart and sage
 In Wisconsin
 Every newsboy that you see
 Has a varsity degree
 Every cook's a Ph.D.
 In Wisconsin. *⁴

Trusts and bosses never mix
 In Wisconsin. *⁵
 Oh the lovely politics
 In Wisconsin. *⁶
 Though the railroads boost the rate
 High in every other state,
 They are famously sedate
 In Wisconsin. *⁷

Matrimony cannot fail
 In Wisconsin.
 Babies are all strong and hale
 In Wisconsin
 That's the state of married bliss
 You have read about ere this
 None but gods may coo and kiss
 In Wisconsin. *⁸

People never locks their doors
 In Wisconsin
 No one hardly ever snores
 In Wisconsin.

Ivy drapes each prison wall
 And the jails ^{*9} no more appall –
 They are social centers ^{*10} all
 In Wisconsin.

Oh the state of states for me
 Is Wisconsin.
 There's the place where I would be
 In Wisconsin:
 I would hasten to her shore
 With a glad and grateful roar,
 Only Jersey needs me more
 Than Wisconsin.

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**1 – This poem was found, as a single sheet of typewriter-generated text, in the UW Archives, in a file, labeled “The Wisconsin Idea.”*

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**2 – For most of the 20th century, Life was a familiar large-format magazine that told contemporary stories through photographs, with minimal amounts of text. However, this well-known magazine was actually the successor to an earlier magazine of the same title. In fact, the earlier magazine, which had started in 1883 and was floundering economically in 1936, was bought that year by Time founder, Henry Luce, mainly so that he could have the rights to the name. The original Life magazine had been a humor, social commentary and light entertainment magazine. People like Norman Rockwell and Charles Dana Gibson – creator of “The Gibson Girl” – supplied lots of illustrations.*

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**3 – In 1912, Charles McCarthy, the Director of the Legislative Reference Bureau, published a book entitled, The Wisconsin Idea. In the preface, he says that he wrote the book because he had been overwhelmed by reporters and representatives from other states’ governments who were seeking information about the laws passed during the extraordinarily productive legislative session of 1911. McCarthy intended the book to answer most of their questions in advance, so he would have to field far fewer of them and could return to his real work at the LRB.*

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**4 – This is a reference to the practical education being offered by the University, both on campus and through its University Extension, which was a division within the University at that time. Wisconsin had been the first state university to create an official division of University Extension, in 1906. It was funded by the legislature in 1907. By 1915, though other universities had founded extension divisions, Wisconsin was dedicating nearly double the funding to extension than was any other state. Van Hise felt that every citizen could learn to do better at his or her “calling” whether it was one of the learned professions or*

not. Knowledge should not be reserved for a privileged class. He felt that the “apprenticeship” mode of learning was limiting, because the learner was limited to what the teacher already knew. He felt that the apprenticeship system was only good for maintaining the status quo, and would not generate any progress. Likewise, farmers whose children learned only what the parent could teach would never advance that calling beyond a manual labor level, though Van Hise felt there was actually a lot that could be improved on farms through systematic research. He felt that people should become lifelong learners.

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**5 – Van Hise wrote a book, entitled Concentration and Control, about ways to eliminate “trusts” (monopolies) and both Van Hise and La Follette had run-ins with a Regent and Madison politician named Elisha “Boss” Keyes, who was frequently charged with corruption.*

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**6 – In the late 1800s, Wisconsin had been known as one of the most corrupt states in the nation. Bob La Follette states in his autobiography (written in the lead up to the 1912 elections) that he had first decided to run for political office when he was a young attorney because a local member of the Republican Party had tried to bribe him. He became a crusader, both to clean up his own (Republican) political party and establish trustworthy, transparent, clean government in the state. When he founded La Follette’s Family Magazine, in 1909, the masthead he chose was “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” When he left the Governorship of Wisconsin to become a U.S. Senator, he began calling himself an “Insurgent Senator.” Corruption was rife in federal government during the “Gilded Age.” Theodore Roosevelt is said to have quipped, “When the role is called in the Senate, Senators don’t know whether to answer “Present” or “Not Guilty.” La Follette developed and maintained a reputation as a no-compromise reformer. Historian David Conant asserts that Wisconsin’s reputation was changed from one of the most corrupt to one of the least corrupt in the nation, in the early 20th century.*

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**7 – On November 1, 1912, Charles Van Hise gave a speech to the Economic Club of New York, before a crowd of 900 at the Hotel Astor. The topic of the evening’s speeches was “Regulation of Competition vs. Regulation of Monopoly.” His short introduction by Mr. Speyer speaks volumes:*

After listening to the interesting and progressive speech of Mr. Brandeis of Boston, it seems difficult to remember the time when we here in New York, and in the East generally, looked upon suggestions as to legislations, etc., that came to us from the West, with astonishment and distrust; but happily this has changed during recent years. We here realize now that people out there are practically facing the same problems that are before us, and that they are trying to resolve them honestly and perhaps with a little more courage than we have. We understand now that the men out West who propose these measures are just as patriotic and good Americans as we are here. No state has been

more active and aggressive in tackling these new problems than has the great state of Wisconsin, and in the front rank have been men connected with the University of Wisconsin. They have furnished correct information, given expert advice, and drafted new laws on various subjects, under the leadership of their President, Dr. Van Hise. His recent book entitled Concentration and Control has won immediate recognition, and the views therein expressed have been incorporated in the Progressive platform. We are very glad that he is spending some time in New York as Chairman of the Board of Arbitration to adjust wages of railway engineers, and we are particularly glad that Dr. Van Hise can be with us tonight.

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**8 – A reference to legislation regarding eugenics. Wisconsin required medical evaluation before a marriage license would be issued. People who were deemed to be mentally incapacitated were not allowed to marry or have children. Eugenics was an attempt to lessen the number of people who would inherit and subsequently pass on mental disabilities. A few decades earlier, farmers had learned to improve the overall genetics of their herds through scientific management. The nation-wide eugenics movement was an attempt to use a similar approach to improve the human condition over time. Reliable birth control had not yet been invented, and this movement became controversial when people who had been deemed mentally defective were forced to undergo sterilization.*

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**9 – Wisconsin still has a reputation for having the best-run prisons in the nation. (Not to be confused with having the most fair conviction rates.)*

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**10 – Wisconsin was a leader in the national “Social Center” movement. University Extension hosted the First National Conference on Social and Civic Center Development, in 1911, in the Red Gym.*

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[\(43\) Build a Home for Wisconsin Spirit!](#)

Though the Wisconsin Union had been started as an organization in 1907, (recall that Van Hise had called for its creation in his Inaugural Address in 1904) it had never had its own building. Instead, it rented basement space from the YMCA next to the Red Gym...that is, until the Union was asked to leave due to the YMCA's disapproval of the cigars and billiards so popular with Union members.

In the aftermath of WWI, when the soldiers were returning from service, the idea emerged that a Union building would be a fitting memorial for the Wisconsin students who had died in the war. When the campaign to raise funds to build the Memorial Union was underway, the rallying cry was, **"Build a Home for Wisconsin Spirit!"**

The spirit in question was not what we'd think of today as "Badger Spirit" – sports fan spirit. It referred to the outstanding spirit of egalitarianism, intelligence and enthusiasm for contributing to the common good that had become the hallmark of the University of Wisconsin, and indeed, of the State of Wisconsin itself.

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[\(44\) Timelines of Crises](#)

A series of world-wide, local and campus crises combined to cause the first wave of the Wisconsin Idea to subside.

In 1914, World War I began in Europe.

Also in 1914, the Stalwart (conservative) faction of the Republican Party won the Governorship of Wisconsin, and a backlash against the Progressives set in. The new Legislature commissioned an efficiency study of the University, conducted by a man who had established a reputation for doing such studies of municipalities. The Allen Report, as it was called, was eventually discontinued when it became clear that Allen and his associates had no qualifications for evaluating a university. Charles Van Hise was still president of the UW, and his close ties with Senator La Follette were well known. Van Hise gradually built a relationship with and earned the trust of the new, conservative governor, Emmanuel L. Philipp.

The Wisconsin Idea continued to thrive, even after Van Hise and La Follette adopted opposite stances about whether the US should enter the war.

In 1917 the U.S. did enter the war, and in November, 1918, it ended. But another crisis followed. One week after the end of the war, Charles Van Hise underwent some minor surgery. The surgery went fine, but he contracted a virulent infection (possibly meningitis) and died at the hospital in Milwaukee on November 19, 1918.

Dairyman, former Governor and former UW Regent William Hoard died on November 22, 1918. Soon, the “Spanish Flu” of 1918 would emerge as a worldwide crisis as well.

However, as the troops returned from war, the movement to build a “Memorial Union” began to build. See [\(43\) Build a Home for Wisconsin Spirit!](#)

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(45) Hoard, Graber and the Alfalfa Order Use Trust to Turn Alfalfa into Cheese

One story of social capital weathering turmoil and reducing transaction costs is that of old William Hoard and young Larry Graber. Together, they built a trusting and trustworthy group composed of working farmers who helped with research preparations and amplified its benefit for the common good.

In 1911, conservative Regent William Hoard (a businessman and former Governor himself) resigned from the Board of Regents because he felt that the Board had become far too slanted in support of Bob La Follette. Hoard's resignation as a Regent didn't appear to sour his relationships with UW's College of Agriculture; instead, he made more of them.

Also in 1911, John Cheesman of Racine and UW professor R.A. Moore, a close associate of Charles Van Hise, co-founded an association designed to promote alfalfa culture in the State, and Hoard was elected Vice President. The group, which was called "The Alfalfa Order of the Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Association," (the WAEA) was the parent organization of purebred seed growers, according to Professor Laurence Graber's memoir, *Mr. Alfalfa* (1976). Young Larry Graber (who eventually became a UW professor of Agronomy, but was then a half-time student assistant to R.A. Moore at the UW) was appointed secretary/treasurer of that organization.

The relationship represented by this voluntary association lasted a long time, and the association produced measurable results. Most of the members of the Alfalfa Order had relationships with the UW as well; most were former students in the Short Courses in the College of Agriculture, and their farms were located all around the state. Together, these people were able to purchase, test and document the results of far more alfalfa varieties than any one farmer – or even the University itself - could have done alone. Through their social capital, they reduced the transaction costs of research that benefitted them all. According to Larry Graber,

...the A.O. became a "broker" for the purchase of a large number of small lots of alfalfa seed for the varietal trials. The growers of this alfalfa seed were paid by checks on the A.O. and at the end of the year, the association was reimbursed by a single university requisition. This simplified the matter of collecting the several small lots of seed of different varieties and strains of alfalfa seed, otherwise, it would be required numerous requisitions for payment of the small amounts of seed required for experimental purposes. (p. 250)

This cooperative effort allowed the researchers at the UW to isolate the most promising strains of alfalfa and spend their time developing those, thereby delivering value to Wisconsin's farmers in a fraction of the time it would have taken otherwise.

Hoard was re-elected Vice President of the Alfalfa Order for the next 7 years, until he died in 1918. Graber served as Secretary/Treasurer until the group was disbanded in 1931. While many groups are disbanded because of lack of interest or lack of effectiveness, the Alfalfa Order disbanded when they

had fully achieved their goal of encouraging widespread cultivation of alfalfa in Wisconsin. They set out to do so because this crop would both be good for the land and good for the dairy industry. It was a nutritious (high protein), profitable (seeds were harvested and sold & plant mass was used for feed), and sustainable (deep roots reduce erosion and fix nitrogen in the soil) hay crop for the dairy industry in Wisconsin.

It has been said that this boost in alfalfa culture contributed to the growing shift in Wisconsin from an agricultural economy dominated by wheat to one dominated by dairy. It's interesting to consider that the people who helped make that happen did so by establishing long-term, trust-based relationships that transcended political differences in the interest of the greater good of the state. And it's mind-blowing when you consider that our state is now internationally known for its cheese production, which was an outgrowth of all of this cooperation. Cheese has become one of the symbols of the State of Wisconsin.

It's also fun to realize that when Aaron Rogers lifted the Lombardi Trophy after the Green Bay Packers won the Super Bowl in 2011, he saw a sea of "Cheesehead" hats in the crowd. Did Aaron Rogers know that this scene would have been very different without the Wisconsin Idea?

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