



The Wisconsin Idea

The Wisconsin Idea proclaims, “*The boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the state.*” It means that the University should not be an ivory tower institution but should serve all the people of the state in relevant ways. This may seem obvious today, but in the mid-19th century it was revolutionary. At that time, most institutions of higher education were private schools which emphasized a “classical” education in Greek and Latin, and few people were privileged to attend.

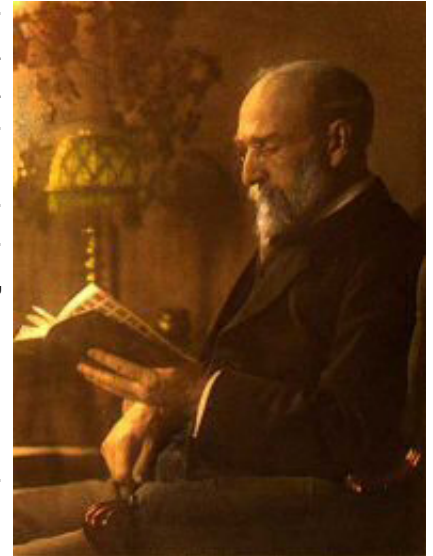
No one knows who coined the phrase “Wisconsin Idea” or when, but as early as 1858 a state legislative committee defined the role of a state-supported university: “The general government has made a munificent donation to the people of Wisconsin. They have an unquestioned right to demand that it shall primarily be adapted to popular needs, that its courses of instruction shall be arranged to meet as fully as possible the wants of the greatest number of our citizens.”

The Wisconsin Idea became nationally famous. In 1912 Theodore Roosevelt, impressed by the way in which Wisconsin had achieved substantial improvements without resorting to sweeping experiments, declared that “all through the Union we need to learn the Wisconsin lesson of scientific popular self-help, and of patient care in radical legislation.”

In recent decades the borders of the University have expanded to the borders of the nation, the world and beyond. Today the University draws students from around the world, sends researchers to every part of the world, and sends experiments into space.

Among the University’s pioneering efforts:

- W In 1860 the University introduced **continuing education** for professionals by offering a short-term course for teachers.
- W UW admitted its first **full-time women students** in 1863.
- W The University established an **experimental farm** in 1866.
- W **University Extension** was founded in 1907 and soon had agriculture agents in every county. It pioneered correspondence courses and is now promoting distance education.
- W WHA (originally 9XM) is the **oldest continually-operating radio station** in the United States.
- W Today UW offers more than 400 **extended hours classes** after 4 p.m. and on weekends and thousands of websites providing information to the public.
- W UW Law School graduates **Robert M. La Follette Sr.** and his wife **Belle Case La Follette** founded the Progressive Party which promoted many reforms including civil service, primary elections, and direct election of US senators. “Fighting Bob” La Follette served as Wisconsin governor and U.S. senator. Belle Case La Follette was the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School, in 1885.
- W In the early 1900s, **Prof. John R. Commons** drafted the state’s first civil service law and helped draft the nation’s first worker’s compensation law.
- W In the 1930s, **Prof. Edwin Witte**, along with other faculty and graduate students, drafted the nation’s first unemployment compensation law and Social Security legislation.



In 1906, UW President Charles Van Hise said, “I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the University reaches every family in the state.”

- W Law **Prof. Frank Turkheimer** served as a special counsel for the Congressional Watergate hearings in 1974.
- W In 1976 **Shirley S. Abrahamson** (S.J.D., U.W. Law School 1962) became the first woman to serve on the state Supreme Court. In 1996 she became the first woman Chief Justice.
- W Over 3100 UW graduates have entered the **Peace Corps**, second only to UC-Berkeley.
- W In 1933, **Prof. Karl Paul Link** synthesized dicumarol, a blood thinner which impedes coagulation. Eventually, Link made more than 100 variants of dicumerol, including Warfarin. Some are used in human medicine and have saved the lives of thousands of people in danger from blood clots.
- W **John Muir** (1864) is considered the father of the national park system and founded the Sierra Club.
- W **Prof. Aldo Leopold** founded the study of wildlife ecology and his 1949 best-selling book *A Sand County Almanac* (referring to Adams County, WI) is a classic which still sells briskly today.
- W Former Wisconsin governor and U.S. Senator **Gaylord Nelson** (LL.B. 1942) founded Earth Day.
- W In 1914, biochemist **Elmer (E.V.) McCollum** identified the first vitamin, Vitamin A, during rodent research, and two years later, he and **Margaret Davis** identified Vitamin B.
- W In 1924, **Harry Steenbock** discovered that ultraviolet light stimulates the formation of Vitamin D, laying the foundation for Vitamin D supplementation of food and eliminating the bone disease rickets.
- W The **1935 Social Security Act** and such innovations as unemployment compensation and anti-trust policy were a direct outgrowth of policies propounded by UW economists John Witte, John Commons and Arthur Altmeyer, who focused on how government could help the welfare of millions of Americans.
- W In the 1950s, long before “alternative energy” was coined, chemist **Farrington Daniels** became an advocate of solar energy. As director of the Solar Energy Laboratory, he explored the sun’s use for heat, electricity, cooking and industrial processes, and early on recognized that solar energy could play a major role in developing countries.
- W In 1958 **Prof. Joshua Lederberg** won the Nobel Prize for discoveries relating to genetic recombination.
- W In 1959, **Verner Suomi** became the first American to conduct weather research from space, when he placed an instrument aboard an early satellite. Suomi later invented a satellite camera capable of imaging Earth that became the foundation for a more holistic and precise view of our planet’s weather. From this starting point, UW-Madison remains a world leader in satellite meteorology.
- W In 1970 Biochemistry **Prof. Har Gobind Khorana** won the Nobel for the first synthesis of a gene.
- W In 1975 Oncology **Prof. Howard Temin** won the prize for discovering retroviruses.
- W Today UW is a world leader in stem cell research under **Prof. James Thomson**, who was the first to develop a replicating strain of stem cells.
- W The University established a **research park** in 1983 under Chancellor Irv Shain. The park now has over 126 tenants and 3500 employees, many of which directly apply UW research.
- W **Steve Carpenter**, the 2011 recipient of the Stockholm Water Prize, has spent his career investigating the ecology and chemistry of fresh water, and helped pioneer “whole-lake experiments” that explored the effects of different management tactics. Carpenter has looked at how invasive species, use of fertilizer, and conservation policies affect the status of the world’s most important liquid—fresh water.

The Wisconsin Initiative for Science Literacy is proud to continue this long tradition of bringing the benefits of University education and research to everyone.