Academic freedom is a concept which may seem unrelated to the Wisconsin Idea, but is quite related when one takes a deeper look at it. Issues of academic freedom are even built into some of UW’s history with the trial of Richard Ely by the board of regents.

Ely, a progressive economics professor, moved to the University of Wisconsin in 1892; his advocacy for unionization and other social reforms made him a prime target for conservative fear-mongering. Oliver E. Wells, the Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction, didn’t approve of Ely’s opinions and wrote a piece entitled “The College Anarchist” about Ely’s book. The piece was picked up by the New York Post, and the board of regents needed to respond.

The trial was huge for the issue of academic freedom. The outcome would dictate the extent to which college professors would be able to voice political dissent in the future. This was not lost on Ely who said “If I am slaughtered, others in university will perish, and what will become of free speech, I do not know.”

The board of regents, though, unanimously voted in his favor, and it was in his report about this case that President Adams wrote the “sifting and winnowing” line which would become a hallmark of UW’s history and a core component of the Wisconsin Idea.1 The precedent of protecting the rights of professors would continue not just at the University of Wisconsin, but across the nation.

With historical context out of the way, there is a general idea of academic freedom, but questions of what exactly it entails and its limitations still abound. Academic freedom is often categorized into two conceptions: the core conception, and the extended conception. The core conception concerns what professors are allowed to research; that is to say that, assuming their methods are ethical and intellectually honest, their job will be protected if they decide to research something which is highly unpopular among the citizenry or even their colleagues.

While the core conception is pretty cut and dry, the extended conception is significantly more murky. The extended conception is characterized as a professor’s right to political activity outside of their profession, but the line between this conception and ordinary civil liberties is difficult to parse. A professor cannot lose their job as a result of political activism outside the classroom (activism which would seem to necessitate some special duties and responsibilities of integrity), and some would say this sets them apart from other Americans who could lose their job as a result of various types of political activism. It would seem, though, that this is not a special right of professors in particular, rather a special right of people working in the public sector because the government needs to have reasons to terminate people which are not based on political bias. It is further argued by William Van Alstyne that the vague extended conception has weakened the more important core conception, preventing it from becoming a constitutional subsection of the first amendment.2

All of this is to say that academic freedom is an ever-growing concept. One could argue that it should apply to entire institutions as they develop curriculum and invite visiting speakers; perhaps it should further apply to students who also should be able to pursue their academic interests. Questions are also posed about whether academic freedom covers poor teaching as well as empirically closed questions about the worth of marginalized people which could make marginalized students feel unsafe and actually stifle free speech and genuine academic inquiry. Academic freedom is a right enshrined not in law, but in precedent which makes it difficult to track, and sometimes difficult to understand. Two thought-provoking pieces on the subject are “Academic Freedom” by Robert L. Simon and “Free Speech and Education” by Sigal Ben-Porath and Dustin Webster which are great resources for those interested in thinking and learning more about the subject.3,4

Works Cited

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1. Ben-Porath S and Webster D. Free Speech and Education (ask harry how to cite this bc I do not have the book :/)
2. Simon RL. Academic Freedom. (‘’)

