Avrie Marsolek

Philos 304

Charles McCarthy and the Legislative Reference Bureau

During the early 20th century, Charles McCarthy, a professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, played a crucial role in the Wisconsin progressive movement. Alongside his work as a professor, he was also a Wisconsin State Senator and later became the chief clerk of the Wisconsin State Assembly. In 1902, through his roles in the Wisconsin Legislature, he promoted the idea of establishing a Legislative Reference Bureau. The goal of the creation of the LRB was to provide Wisconsin lawmakers with expert research to better inform their law-making process. This agency, which was nonpartisan, served as a very valuable resource as it offered a wide range of information on legislative issues and policies while also allowing legislators to have informed discussions on those policies. Additionally, through McCarthy’s role as a professor and within the state government, he was able to bridge the gap between the two ends of State Street and allowed the University’s expertise and research to be applied practically by the policymakers in the Capitol.

The creation of the Legislative Reference Bureau in Wisconsin showcases one of the prominent characteristics of the Wisconsin Idea: the boundaries of the University should extend beyond simple academics and should contribute to the betterment of Wisconsin and society at large. In the case of Charles McCarthy and the Legislative Reference Bureau, McCarthy successfully connected the expertise of the University and the lawmakers in the legislature. Due to the fact that the agency allowed easy access to unbiased information on prevalent policies and issues, policy making become more informed and discussions around these issues were very successful. To conclude, Charles McCarthy’s creation of the Legislative Reference Bureau allowed for a successful academic connection between the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Wisconsin State Legislature, and the citizens across the state.