When one hears the name of Richard Ely, it’s most likely that it will be mentioned in the context of discussion surrounding his public trial by the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents in 1894. Oliver Elwin Wells, the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Wisconsin and member of the University of Wisconsin’s Board of Regents, made the claim that Ely was teaching socialism to his students. At this time, Ely was a prominent figure at the University, serving as the director of the School of Economics, Political Science, and History, as well as being the University’s professor of Political Economy. Wells sought that Ely be expelled from the University and removed from these duties. As a result of the charges brought forth by Wells, Ely was tried in a public hearing and acquitted unanimously. The Board of Regents issued their own report of the hearing, which included the now famous quote “Whatever may be the limitations that 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.” The University’s enthusiastic support of academic freedom (link to page on academic freedom) would become a central component of the Wisconsin Idea, following the precedent set by this trial.

In concordance with his advocacy for academic freedom, Ely could often be seen speaking publicly about his own political and professional opinions. He supported the formation of labor unions, favored state intervention to prevent the formation of monopolies, and sought an end to child labor. These ideas were unpopular in the economics community at the time, as they went against the widely accepted theory of a laissez-faire system of non-interference. Unfortunately, Ely also publicly supported eugenics (link to page on eugenics) and believed that the state should seek to support white people over people of other races. Ely’s beliefs on this matter would go on to be influential in the development of redlining. Redlining was a practice adopted by the federal government during the 1930s under which the government would refuse to insure mortgages in neighborhoods with high populations of racial minorities. The negative effects of redlining are still plainly visible today, and it is difficult to overstate the damage these policies have done.

Ely believed that University professors could and should contribute to the public good in the public, social, and government spheres. He was a notable proponent of the idea that professors should provide their expertise to government officials, a value which became synonymous with the Wisconsin Idea. Professionally, Ely made sizeable contributions to the development of the field of Economics in the United States. He was one of the founders of the American Economic Association, a professional organization which supports and publishes economic research. Ely was also the first president of the American Association for Labor Legislation, an organization founded by economists with the purpose to study and advocate for labor legislation. Later in his career, Ely was a pioneer in the field of Land Economics, the study of the economics of natural resources. Ely also established a journal, *Land Economi*cs, which has been published by the University of Wisconsin Press since 1925. Ely was instrumental in the development of what we now know as the Wisconsin Idea, and sought to enact it by making every effort to use his knowledge and expertise in service to the public interest.