A definition of eugenics at the time of the term’s creation is "the study of the agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally." Eugenics began to grow in popularity and support in the United States in the 1900s to 1920s, replacing the formerly prevailing concept of Social Darwinism. The concept of forced sterilization became more normalized and the first eugenic sterilization law passed in the United States in 1907. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld such laws until 1927, and the overall support for eugenics remained prominent in the U.S. until a rapid decline following the horrific revelations concerning Nazi eugenics during WWII.

      Former UW president Charles Van Hise was a eugenicist and promoted eugenic thought by founding the University of Wisconsin School of Criminology and advocating for eugenic laws in the State of Wisconsin as part of the ‘Wisconsin Idea.’ The Wisconsin Idea paved the way for a relationship between the State of Wisconsin and the university. This pathway allowed university experts to inform the public and legislators on new concepts, methodologies, research findings, relevant science, and new understandings. Influence of thought and idea is helped through the background of public and highly respected universities such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Van Hise used this credibility to promote his eugenic thought and further along the Wisconsin sterilization and marriage statutes, “authorizing involuntary sterilization of inmates of mental and penal institutions and requiring verification that both parties to a marriage were not ‘epileptic, insane, or idiotic’, nor carrying venereal disease – syphilis was assumed to be a disease of ‘degeneracy’ carried by the poor, foreign immigrants, African Americans, and otherwise marginalized people”. The passing of the Wisconsin sterilization and marriage statues contributed to Wisconsin being eleventh in the nation for most sterilizations performed with one thousand eight hundred and twenty-three people. The final repeal of the sterilization law in Wisconsin did not occur until 1978. The historical involvement of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in eugenics lingers a dark cloud over the university's ethical reflection, emphasizing the importance of responsible research practices and the commitment to using the powers of the university for the greater good.