How UW-Madison incorporates the Wisconsin Idea into Financial Aid Decisions

UW-Madison was created, first and foremost, to educate Wisconsin citizens. However, with increasing globalization, our identity as a university has shifted to include many out-of-state students, as well as international students. With this shift, the idea of accessibility has been pushed to the forefront of conversations regarding the role of UW-Madison as an institution that serves the State of Wisconsin. These conversations beg the question, “what is UW-Madison currently doing to maintain a commitment to Wisconsin residents?” The guiding message of UW-Madison, the Wisconsin Idea, answers this question by drawing on one of its main theories, that by helping residents amass knowledge through education, the entirety of the state prospers. This sentiment has shaped UW-Madison’s decision to focus their financial aid efforts on Wisconsin residents, especially those who come from underrepresented backgrounds, to continue prioritizing the growth of statewide prosperity in Wisconsin.

As current financial aid programs have shown, UW-Madison has an “ongoing commitment” to Wisconsin families in terms of accessibility and affordability.[[1]](#footnote-0) The University seeks to “enhance the quality of life in the state.”[[2]](#footnote-1) UW-Madison works to improve residents' quality of life through various pathways, but their commitment to keeping higher education accessible has had the effect of pulling citizens out of poverty and inspiring larger communities to follow suit. The benefits of receiving higher education, which include a higher earning potential and the confidence to critically engage with others, suggest that higher education should be available to all students who are willing to put in the work to receive it. As a principle, the Wisconsin Idea speaks to higher education as a public good, which corroborates this.[[3]](#footnote-2) In other words, all citizens have a stake in education. The Wisconsin Idea also promotes the idea that “education is (one of) the keys to a vibrant society that benefits *all* citizens.”[[4]](#footnote-3) The term “all citizens” includes the citizens who don’t traditionally fit into higher educational settings, like those from rural settings or those from less-privileged backgrounds. In order for society to recognize the challenges these different communities face and successfully benefit all citizens, members of these marginalized communities need to be present in the conversations that affect them, necessitating representation in education. One way this idea has been realized at UW-Madison is in the target audiences of our financial aid programs.

In financial aid specifically, the University has been especially successful in targeting under-represented Wisconsin students, with recent revolutionary efforts like Bucky's Pell Pathway and Bucky's Tuition Promise working to make college more accessible to students from low-income backgrounds.[[5]](#footnote-4) Bucky’s Pell Pathway is a need-based initiative to support Wisconsin residents who are deemed eligible to receive the Pell Grant through their FAFSA. The Pell Grant is a type of federal financial aid that demonstrates a student has substantial financial need.[[6]](#footnote-5) Bucky’s Tuition Promise is a need-based initiative that promises tuition coverage for students with household AGIs under $65,000.[[7]](#footnote-6) These two initiatives have been exceptionally helpful for low-income students who decide to attend UW-Madison. In 2022, 66 out of 72 counties in Wisconsin were represented in the identities of students who received Bucky’s Tuition Promise.[[8]](#footnote-7) These programs act on “promises,” which are derived from the ideals of the Wisconsin Idea. This connection is evident as both programs center around students from within Wisconsin and they “promise” to make higher education feasible, alleviating potential fiscal burdens. In order for the State to prosper via education, residents must first be able to receive the education they need to help promote prosperity. Making education inclusive and possible for a greater audience meets the expectations of the Wisconsin Idea. The practice of including the Wisconsin Idea in research or education methods at UW-Madison would be ineffective without the assurance that all Wisconsin residents are able to benefit from the work at hand, either as participants or recipients.

Another program that speaks to how the Wisconsin Idea is taken into consideration regarding financial aid at UW-Madison is the School of Education’s Teacher Pledge program. This program offers financial support to future Wisconsin educators by paying the equivalent of in-state tuition and fees, testing, and licensing costs for all students who promise to teach in Wisconsin PK-12 schools for three to four years after graduation. Different from Bucky’s Pell Pathway and Bucky’s Tuition Promise, this initiative is a financial incentive open to *all* students studying teacher education. This program is not need-based, nor is it solely open to Wisconsin residents. This initiative is clearly an effort to further the Wisconsin Idea, as it promotes keeping our educators in Wisconsin. Education is a key to the Wisconsin Idea’s end goal of fostering positive civic engagement in citizens. Efficiently educating the masses inherently involves increasing access to quality education all throughout Wisconsin, which is hoped to be achieved through the Wisconsin Teacher Pledge Program. In order for students to excel as active citizens, their PK-12 education must be able to prepare them accordingly. An incentive for strong educators to stay in-state, the Teacher Pledge counteracts the teacher shortage, ensuring the youth of Wisconsin receive quality educations.

UW-Madison uses the ideas presented in the Wisconsin Idea to choose who they will include as eligible recipients of their innovative financial aid programs, focusing their efforts on Wisconsin residents, especially those from potentially disadvantaged backgrounds. Education is a key factor of the Wisconsin Idea, which mandates the University play a role in guiding the creation of new programs that make higher education more accessible to residents. The feats promised by the Wisconsin Idea can only be managed if all citizens of Wisconsin are included as beneficiaries of the good produced by the University. UW-Madison continues to strengthen and design structures that center the Wisconsin Idea, like the financial aid programs covered above, to engage more residents in furthering their education and giving back to their communities.

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