The formation of America’s most effective social support system, at least in part, owes its structure to a man committed to the Wisconsin Idea. Edwin Witte was a long-time professor at the University of Wisconsin- Madison and would eventually be called on by President Franklin Roosevelt. His task was to head the 1934 Presidential Committee on Economic Security. Witte was particularly qualified for the job as a result of his extensive time spent interacting with the Wisconsin State Legislature. His proficiency in policy alongside his dedication to the state made him a clear candidate for crafting the poignant legislation that FDR desired.

Although Witte, who would be first to tell you, was not alone in the process of molding the program, his position came with a great deal of responsibility. He was tasked with writing the entire report that came out of the committee and defending this proposition before both chambers of Congress. Witte engrossed himself in the work, expending countless hours hammering out details with committee members and legislators alike. Witte was determined to apply his economic expertise, honed at the University of Wiscon, the bring the American people a much needed support system.

On August 14th, 1935, Social Security was signed into law by President Roosevelt. Capping a monumental effort on the part of Witte and the Presidential Committee on Economic Security. Since then the social program has been incredibly successful in providing Americans with financial security, primarily in the elderly population. As of 2023, 96.5 %of the population over 60 have collected their Social Security. This illustrates the demand for such an initiative and the efficiency with which such a large base can be assisted. Furthermore, the program keeps 22 million citizens a year out of poverty including almost 15 million seniors and 1 million children.

Edwin Witte stands as a shining example of the level of impact hoped to be achieved by an adherence to the Wisconsin Idea. From achieving his doctorate in economics and working closely with the Wisconsin Legislature to toiling over the creation of the nation’s greatest social safety net, Witte was able to parlay his excellent education, provided to him by the state, into a career that brought infinite returns to that investment.