THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERISTY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM AND THE WISCONSIN IDEA

The birth of the Wisconsin Idea occurred when what is now known as the University of Wisconsin – Madison was simply known as the University of Wisconsin. Notably, this title is singular, as the institution did not belong to any overarching system. It was only until 1956 when the now University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee joined into a partnership with the University of Wisconsin – Madison to create the former University of Wisconsin System. At this time, another state university system existed in Wisconsin – the Wisconsin State Universities system. Many key differences in university functions and missions determined which colleges would be a part of what system. In 1971, both the former University of Wisconsin System and the Wisconsin State Universities system merged, creating a cohesive public higher education cohort.

However, the universities which joined into the system each have their storied history and unique missions. The University of Wisconsin – Madison has had longstanding reputation for giving students a liberal arts education. The College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin – Madison describes this form of education as a “a journey of self-discovery,” with the aims to make a college experience “that is rich in discovery, exploration, personal growth, and new ideas.”[1] Unlike many other land grant institutions, this mission to cultivate real-world thinkers has been alive since the founding of the University. Spanning from research to teaching, service to public outreach, the University of Wisconsin – Madison has always emphasized growing students’ intellectual skills to become stronger intellectual and more civic citizens.

Other institutions in the system were instead founded with the emphasis to make students workplace ready by giving them a strong vocational education. Many normal schools in the early twentieth century, some being land grant institutions, provided training in fundamentally different ways than the University of Wisconsin did. Universities, such as the Kansas State Agricultural College, abolished instruction in foreign languages and shifted focus on agricultural and administrative practices.[2] This was a trend that swept across many institutions in America. The present UW-Stout was originally designed to “provide facilities in the way of buildings, equipment, and teachers, through which young people of both sexes may secure such instruction and training in industrial and related lines of educational effort as will enable them to become efficient industrial, social, and economic units within their environment.”[3] Even today, UW-Stout states its mission is to be “a comprehensive, career-focused polytechnic university.” However, high emphasis is now placed on the focused of the betterment of the state, and they note the desire for “students, faculty and staff [to] use applied learning, scientific theory and research to solve real-world problems, grow the state's economy, and serve society.”[4] The University of Wisconsin System is comprised of institutions with vastly different histories, missions, and visions of what obtaining a degree truly means. However, all institutions acting as one unit contribute to making well-informed citizens as well as career ready individuals, both strong ideals when considering the application of the Wisconsin Idea.

[1] University of Wisconsin – Madison. 2023. *Guide: College of Letters and Science.* https://guide.wisc.edu/undergraduate/letters-science/

[2] Nelson, Adam R. 2023. Lecture: *From Land Grants to the Wisconsin Idea, 1862-1912.*

[3] University of Wisconsin – Stout. *About Us: Our Rich History*. https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us/mission-values/our-rich-history.

[4] University of Wisconsin – Stout. *About Us: Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University.* https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us.