



December 30, 2019

Continue the Wisconsin Idea

The Wisconsin Idea was born in 1905 when UW President Charles Van Hise stated, “I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the University reaches every family of the state.” His idea was concise: education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom. The philosophy holds true today, and whoever presides over the University of Wisconsin System much incorporate this ideal into all aspects of higher education.

The UW System will soon select a new system president to replace retiring UW System President Dr. Ray Cross. The new president will face a system starved of funds, faculty and staff “brain drain” to states providing better university funding, and improved morale. The challenges will require a strong individual who can build confidence and consensus throughout the state.

The UW System has a history of shared governance between regents, UW administrators, staff and students when it comes to selecting new leadership. Both previous presidential search committees consisted of 18 members from diverse UW backgrounds, including students who haven’t served as regents. This selection committee model proved inclusive--and successful.

Unfortunately, Regent Petersen appointed a narrow search and screen committee that does not include faculty or staff, and possesses only one student who currently serves as a Regent. The search committee makeup does not reflect the university community, nor how decisions should be made. His selection initiative does not reflect the Wisconsin Idea concept ensuring the “University reaches every family of the state.”

Sometimes change is not good. The poorly-considered decision to not enjoin education stakeholders in the selection process is a step backwards, not forward, in finding and selecting a new Wisconsin system president. We encourage Regent Petersen to reconsider the makeup of the selection committee, and allow all involved in higher education--regents, UW administrators, staff and students—select the right person to further The Wisconsin Idea.

Dianne Hesselbein (D-Middleton) represents the 79th District in the Wisconsin State Assembly and currently serves on the Colleges and Universities Committee.

###