

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM

ABANDONING THE MIDDLE CLASS

JOHN MCADAMS

The University of Wisconsin system, providing an inexpensive, heavily taxpayer-subsidized college education has, since it first opened its doors in 1850, had as its core constituency the state's middle class families. Although there have been many heartening examples of upward mobility in American society, the simple fact is that poor families are, and have always been, unlikely to send their children

to college. And rich families have had little trouble affording expensive private college tuition. That leaves the solid middle class—families that can provide a good elementary and secondary education for their children, and that value education as well as families that would flinch at the cost of a private college (especially in the era before Federal financial aid). The system has been a godsend to them.

Yet the Wisconsin middle class appears to have lost confidence in the system. In a secret study done last fall, which eventually got leaked to the media, it was revealed that among Wisconsin residents:

1. Nearly 70% of respondents said they thought UW campuses have more administrators than they need.



2. Nearly 60% said they thought UW campuses don't think they have to watch their dollars like the rest of us.

3. More than 70% said they thought UW campuses spend too much money on things they don't need instead of concentrating on educating students.

4. Almost 75% said they could not afford to send their

child to a UW System school without the aid of scholarships, grants or loans.¹

University of Wisconsin administrators interpreted these results as showing that more effort needs to be made to improve the image of the system. The idea that the public might be right and that some radical reforms are necessary apparently has never crossed their minds.

Events since can hardly have improved the system's image. The University of Wisconsin system has faced a steady drumbeat of bad publicity in the past year.

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Academic Incompetence: Hiring a 9/11 U.S. Government Conspiracy Theorist

It's an old tradition in America for conservative parents to send their children off to be indoctrinated by liberal and leftist college faculty. Indeed, middle class parents have been fairly tolerant (perhaps too tolerant) of this.

But what are we to think when the UW system hires someone with such extreme views that very few of a liberal, left-leaning faculty agree with them? We are talking, of course, about one Kevin Barrett, who is currently teaching a course in the History of Islam at the Madison campus. Barrett believes that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were the work of the U.S. government. He believes that reporter Daniel Pearle was killed by our own CIA because . . . he was getting too close to the truth of 9/11. He believes that videos of captives supposedly being killed by terrorists have actually been faked by a psychological warfare unit linked to Mossad and Western intelligence. He believes that the U.S. government was behind the Oklahoma City bombing. He asserts that it is Vice President Cheney who is the most likely 9/11 suspect to find himself hanged for treason within the next year.²

To say that Barrett is controversial would be an understatement. Not only has Republican gubernatorial candidate Mark Green called for him to be fired, so has Democratic Governor Jim Doyle and the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*.³ The UW system has insisted that he will not be fired, citing academic freedom.⁴ If that was all there was to the issue, the UW system would be on firm ground.

The problem is that Barrett only has academic freedom because UW-Madison *gave* it to him by hiring him. The university, to use the now-hackneyed analogies, did something equivalent to hiring a Holocaust denier to teach Jewish history, or a flat-earther to teach geography. As the American Council of Trustees and Alumni put it:

The problem here is not academic freedom itself. The problem is sloppy hiring. All university teachers should have the acade-

mic freedom to teach as they see fit. But not everyone deserves to be a university teacher, and not everyone can be trusted with the privilege of academic freedom. UW needs to tighten up its hiring practices, and it needs to take the hiring of adjunct lecturers just as seriously as it takes the hiring of tenure-track teachers. Otherwise, it fails the student—and the taxpayer—in a fundamental obligation to ensure that those it allows into the classroom are legitimately there.

Alright. Fine. They blundered and then refused to correct the blunder because that would infringe on academic freedom.

But unfortunately, the university turns out to be less protective of academic freedom than originally claimed. Only a few days after UW-Madison announced that Barrett was free to teach, Provost Patrick Farrell sent him a letter telling him to quit seeking publicity for himself. According to the Associated Press:⁵

I was trying to be fairly careful to not inhibit his privilege of speaking freely, Farrell said. My point was that he should be aware as he exercises those rights there may be a time when I have to rethink the assurances he has given me about his ability to separate his opinions from what happens in the classroom.

Those assurances, of course, were what persuaded Farrell to allow Barrett to teach.

Further, Barrett was warned not to associate his name with the university. Again, he wrote in the letter, obtained by The Associated Press in an open records request:

In summary, if you continue to identify yourself with UW-Madison in your personal political messages or illustrate an inability to control your interest in publicity for your ideas, I would lose confidence. . . .

Of course, all professors identify themselves with the institutions where they teach.

Traditional canons of academic freedom put some limits on what professors can say in the classroom; they are theoretically not free to indoctrinate students nor to convey factually incorrect material—although as a practical

matter they get away with a good deal of both. But outside the classroom professors have an almost unlimited right to express their opinions.⁶

But UW-Madison has turned this situation on its head, fully protecting Barrett in the classroom, and trying to shut up his public statements under penalty of having Farrell lose confidence in him. This means fire him.

Hostility Toward Christianity

The majority of Wisconsin families identify themselves as Christian. A June 2006 poll from the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute found 47% of Wisconsites saying they are Protestants and 31% saying they are Catholic.⁷ Going beyond mere identification, 39% of Wisconsinites report going to church once a week or more, and another 17% report going to church once or twice a month.⁸ Traditionally the state system has exercised a sort of benign neutrality toward religion on its campuses. But recently a series of conflicts has arisen.

Dormitory Bible Studies in La Crosse

Late last year, a controversy arose over the policy of UW-Eau Claire, which forbid Resident Assistants (RAs) in dorms from holding Bible studies in their rooms. The claim was that Resident Assistants might exercise undue pressure⁹ over students for whom they are responsible. In the institution's defense, it claimed an even-handed unwritten policy banning political, religious and sales events in dorms.¹⁰ But the Resident Assistant who chose to make an issue of this complained that the rule was not uniformly enforced.¹¹ And indeed the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* found students at UW-Eau Claire reporting that Bible studies led by RAs have been prevalent for years.¹² This kind of inconsistent enforcement is what

we would expect of an unwritten policy, and Christians could reasonably suspect that a Christian Bible study would raise concerns among campus bureaucrats that (say) a meeting of the Gay/Straight Alliance would not.

Refusing to Fund a Catholic Organization in Madison

Another hubbub resulted when the UW Roman Catholic Foundation, in Madison, asked the university for \$200,000 from student activity fee money, to cover a variety of expenses. The Foundation serves Catholics (and sometimes non-Catholics) among the student body. In 2003-2004 the Foundation had gotten \$44,000, and in 2004-2005 it had gotten \$88,000. Yet the request was rejected, on the grounds that student fees should not be used to support religious activities.¹³

Refusing to Recognize the Knights of Columbus

Finally, just this past August the Madison campus announced that it is refusing to recognize the Knights of Columbus, which has been a recognized student organization there for over 30

years. The supposed reason: the Knights of Columbus violates the schools nondiscrimination policy, since only male Catholics can be members.¹⁴

The Motivation

The recent crackdown on Christian organizations is a reversal of prior policy. With regard to Bible studies at UW-Eau Claire, it's a reversal of previously accepted informal practice. With regard to the Knights of Columbus, it's the reversal of a policy that has existed for a generation. With funding for the Roman Catholic Foundation, it's a reversal of a practice accepted for two years.

The claim, in these cases, is that government should not violate the separation of

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church and state and should not establish religion and should not allow discrimination. Superficially appealing, these arguments are not only unfair to religious believers, but at odds with how the courts are now interpreting the First Amendment and (of course) at odds with the way the Founders interpreted the First Amendment.

In a case called *Southworth v. The UW System Board of Regents*, the Supreme Court ruled that state colleges may force students to pay activity fees, and use those fees for activities to which individual students object, but only if the distribution of the money is done with viewpoint neutrality.¹⁵ As Tim Krause of the Roman Catholic Foundation said, "You can't say you'll fund the band, the sexual expressive activities, the lesbians, then single out worship as the one thing you won't fund."¹⁶ Indeed, Madison's own Student Judiciary ruled that the University had acted illegally in denying funding.¹⁷

The notion that student organizations should not be allowed to discriminate is likewise appealing only superficially. UW Madison has a system of fraternities and sororities, both of which discriminate by gender.¹⁸ And a recent ruling by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the right of a Christian student organization at Southern Illinois Law School to require its members to abide by Christian standards of conduct.¹⁹ The simple fact is that neither a Catholic organization that wants to limit its membership to Catholics nor a sorority that wants to limit its membership to women is anything like the owner of a café that doesn't want to serve blacks. To pretend that they are is boneheaded.

Note that in the case of dorm Bible studies at UW-Eau Claire, and funding for the Roman Catholic Foundation at Madison, school officials relented in the face of negative publicity and the threat of lawsuits from Christian civil liberties groups.²⁰ Quite likely, they will have to relent on the issue of the Knights of Columbus too. But that doesn't change the fact that they *wanted* to discriminate against Christians. Thus the UW system has gained

the reputation as a place where Christian students cannot feel secure in their rights, but rather must continually fight for them.

Racial Preferences

Racial preferences are an endemic part of American higher education, so it's not surprising to find them in the UW system. But public opposition continues to be strong, and a new "holistic" system of admissions has put the issue in the spotlight.

In a 2003 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court told the University of Michigan that it could not, in effect, have a spreadsheet in which students got points for various academic factors, and then got extra points for being black or Hispanic or the member of some other minority. But the Court held that colleges could evaluate applicants in a "holistic" manner, and that racial preferences would be acceptable in that context.²¹ The UW system quickly adopted this concept, publicly announcing that high school grades and college admissions scores would mean less, and that race, income, leadership and similar factors would become much more important.

The concept was so controversial that even Governor Doyle criticized it, saying:

[I]f you work hard, get decent grades and do well on your ACT, you should get into a UW school. You should not be subjected to some convoluted system in which a bureaucrat will arbitrarily determine if you "fit the mold."²²

As one might expect, Republican politicians were no more favorable.

Neither was the public. The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute asked a representative sample of citizens:

The University of Wisconsin System is changing its admissions policies. It is moving away from the current system that uses grades, class rankings, and test scores to a holistic approach that favors subjective, non-quantifiable factors. Would you favor or oppose these new UW admissions standards?

Thirty percent said they favored the change, and 55% said they opposed it.

Likewise state citizens were asked:

One factor that will be used is that every UW campus must take race into account, among many other considerations, in deciding whom to admit, to promote diversity. Would you favor or oppose race as a consideration for admissions?

Only 26% said they favored using race as a consideration, and 65% said they opposed it.²³

Regardless of what one thinks of racial preferences, the bald fact is that white kids from middle class families cannot be assured that they can earn their way into the UW system by good grades and high ACT scores. They will likely be, more than in the past, victims of racial discrimination. And their parents aren't happy about it.

The Future Path: Work Toward Privatization

It might be tempting to recommend that the UW system rebuild its connection with the Wisconsin middle class, but we would propose the precise opposite path.

The state legislature and the governor should work toward the privatization of the system.

To understand the logic of this, it's necessary to understand that the system of government-run colleges and universities—paid for largely out of taxpayer money, offering a college education at a fraction of the cost of delivering that education—has always been a bad idea.

This has been recognized at least since Karl Marx. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx noted demands for universal compulso-

ry school attendance and free instruction. He observed that,

If in some states of the [United States] higher education institutions are also free, that only means in fact defraying the cost of education of the upper classes from the general tax receipts.²⁴

And indeed, that's the way it has been. Consistently, parents of children in state higher education systems have been shown to have higher incomes than the taxpayers who are subsidizing their kids education.²⁵ For example, in 2004 the median family income of freshmen at the University of Wisconsin, Madison was \$72,000 per year, far above the median state income.²⁶

Add to this the efficiency losses that come from giving the state a near-monopoly on higher education—with students being allowed to opt out of the state system only at great additional expense. In the first place, state education systems have little incentive to improve the quality of the product, since most of their customers have no ability to shop around outside of the system.

Likewise, they have no incentive to provide the same service cheaper since doing so would merely reduce state subsidies and shrink bureaucratic empires.

Not only do monopolies lack incentives to use resources efficiently, large efficiency losses are imposed by restrictions on choice. For many students, a private college in Wisconsin, or a college (either public or private) in another state would be the best educational choice. But to opt for such a choice is to discard a large tuition subsidy that Wisconsin taxpayers would otherwise pay.

Simply severing the tie between Wisconsin government and the system isn't politically pos-

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sible, but several incremental steps are. For example, state subsidies to the UW system should be cut and cut again. Politically, this won't be easy, since bureaucrats, not otherwise known to be creative or innovative, can be extremely clever when protecting their budgets.

One standard, well-proven tactic is one that journalist Charles Peters has called the "Fireman First Principle."²⁷ Imagine that the city council informs the mayor that he must submit a budget with reduced spending. There are two possible ways of reducing spending the required amount. The mayor can fire some surplus bureaucrats at city hall, or can close a couple of fire stations. Which does he propose? Closing the fire stations, of course.

The mayor, remember, doesn't want to actually reduce spending. What he wants is a public uproar that will cause the city council to allow him to spend at a higher level. This was the tactic used by the Racine Unified School District when voters turned down a referendum to increase taxes.²⁸ And it was the tactic used by the University of Wisconsin system in late 2002, when a huge state deficit caused talk of a reduced subsidy. The campuses of the state system cut back admissions sharply.²⁹

How should the legislature and governor respond to such tactics? By sweetening programs that allow options other than the UW system. The state already runs a small program (Wisconsin Tuition Grants) to provide tuition subsidies for Wisconsin students who go to Wisconsin private colleges. It can be expanded to include colleges public *and* private in other states. A logical extension of this idea would be deductions on state income taxes, or indeed even a tax credit for tuition at colleges outside the Wisconsin state system.³⁰

Such policies would create more competition for the state system, while at the same time providing subsidies to middle-class taxpayers. Such taxpayers would, in effect, be compensated for increases in UW system tuition. Further, such taxpayers would be huge beneficiaries of the efficiency gains resulting from more choice.

Of course, faced with a cut in state subsidy, the bureaucrats will have to increase tuition, and will claim that lower income students are being priced out of attending the UW system. The proper response to this is simply to allocate more funds to means-tested financial aid.

If this sounds at all radical, it might be good to remember that it's just an extension of current trends. State appropriations to the UW system have been essentially flat, in inflation-adjusted dollars, over the last ten years, at about \$780 million in 1995 dollars. On the other hand, tuition and fees have nearly doubled, from a bit over \$260 million, to a bit over \$520 million, in 1995 dollars, over that same period.³¹ Indeed, student tuition and fees (\$721 million in 2005) now rivals state appropriations (\$897 million in 2005) as a source of revenue.

While this situation has caused a lot of hand-wringing, a set of policies that subsidizes college education independent of the UW system would soften the blow quite considerably. It might even leave most parents and students feeling better off.

Conclusion

The traditional system wherein the University of Wisconsin system served the interests of the state's middle class parents isn't coming back. Where some issues are concerned, it shouldn't. Equalizing in-state and out-of-state tuition, for example, tends to make the system more national in nature, and more diverse. And by diversity here we mean not merely politically correct diversity (having more black students from Detroit and American Indians from North Dakota), but also politically incorrect diversity (having more Baptists from Texas and Irish Catholics from Boston).

In other areas, the system should backtrack, but will not be willing to. The bureaucrats *want* to discriminate against whites, and can (as in California and Texas) find ways to do so regardless of legislative oversight or even referenda outlawing racial preferences.

Likewise, it would be silly to expect administrators in the system to somehow quit viewing Christians with suspicion.

But what might happen, and what can be moved toward incrementally, is a more genuinely open and competitive system.

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