

OPINION: HOW CAN INDIANA LEARN FROM THE WISCONSIN IDEA IN 2026 AND BEYOND?

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I VISITED MY GRANDPARENTS over winter break in Madison, Wisconsin, a place I've returned to every year for twenty years. This visit felt different though, not because Madison had changed, but because I had. I am taking a year off from medical school to pursue my MBA and I found myself noticing how the state signals trust, participation, and public ownership.

On the drive into town, I passed Woodman's Markets, which had a bold message underneath its sign: "EMPLOYEE OWNED." It struck me as a proud declaration of shared stake and responsibility. That spirit echoed elsewhere. Knowing I would soon be an intern in the Indiana Senate, I visited the Wisconsin State Capitol and discovered that it is open to the public every day of the year. No appointments. No metal detectors. Multiple entrances. On Christmas Eve, my brothers and I walked freely inside.

By contrast, the Indiana Statehouse is closed on Sundays and many holidays, with limited public entrances and mandatory security screening. These architectural and access differences are not just logistical choices; they communicate values. One model emphasizes openness and public presence while the other prioritizes control and formality.

What explains this difference in civic posture?

Much of Wisconsin's civic identity traces back to the Progressive Era and what became known as the "Wisconsin Idea." Articulated by Charles Van Hise, then president of the University of Wisconsin, the idea held that the influence of the public university should extend to the boundaries of the state and that academic expertise exists to serve the public good. Professors regularly advised legislators, staffed commissions, and brought research directly into policymaking. The physical proximity of the University of Wisconsin-Madison to the state capitol symbolized this alliance and made collaboration easier. This partnership was championed by leaders like Robert La Follette, whose vision of government rested

on the belief that democratic legitimacy flows from an informed and engaged public.

Wisconsin's civic tradition extends beyond higher education and politics. While discussing these ideas with a friend, I was reminded that the Green Bay Packers are the only major professional sports franchise owned by the public rather than a private individual. Packers shareholders receive no profits and hold limited governance rights, but this structure permanently prevents sale or relocation. This structure reflects the Wisconsin Idea's insistence that major public institutions exist not only to maximize profit, but to serve enduring civic purposes.

Indiana's early twentieth-century path was markedly different. Our state pioneered coercive eugenics legislation and later saw significant political influence exercised through exclusionary movements. In 1907, Indiana enacted the world's first modern compulsory eugenic sterilization statute, targeting people labeled "criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists" in state custody. By the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana had more control of the state government than any other state outside the South. These histories matter not as condemnation, but as context. Civic cultures are inherited, shaped over decades by the institutions we empower and the voices we elevate. Understanding where we came from can help us understand how to move forward.

Today, Indiana's public priorities emphasize workforce development and economic efficiency. These goals are crucial to a successful community. But when pursued without equal investment in civic education and public engagement, they risk narrowing the role of public institutions. Universities become job pipelines rather than civic partners.

There are signs of change. Investments by Indiana University and Purdue University in Indianapolis suggest a renewed effort to integrate higher education with the life of the state. Indiana University is expand-

ing its scope through cooperative training and research agreements with life sciences firms. Purdue is rapidly expanding its downtown Indianapolis footprint around engineering and technology aligned with advanced manufacturing and corporate partnerships. The governor has also worked with all public universities in the state to freeze tuition for two years. Together, these approaches echo the Wisconsin Idea in their emphasis on public-facing scholarship.

Yet this integration must go beyond industry alignment and workforce development. A public university's highest obligation remains the pursuit of truth and the cultivation of informed citizens—capable not only of contributing to our state's economic growth, but of understanding how to participate meaningfully in civic and political life.

At a moment when public trust in expertise—especially

in science and medicine—is eroding, this mission is urgent. Physicians, scientists, and medical students occupy a unique position of public credibility. Our responsibility does not end at the clinic door. Civic engagement, policy literacy, and public communication are essential components of professional ethics.

If Indiana hopes to chart a more participatory and accountable future, it should revisit the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea. That begins with universities that see public engagement as central, not peripheral; with statehouses that welcome citizens not only symbolically but physically; and with graduates who view civic responsibility as part of their professional identity.

For medical students especially, the lesson is clear: the physician of tomorrow must also be a citizen today.

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