



# Documenting the Aims of Higher Education in Wisconsin

Bailey B. Smolarek, Matthew Wolfgram, Micayla Darrow, Cassandra Duernberger, Cassidy Hartzog, Kathryn Hendrickson Gagen, Ryan Mulrooney, David Singer, and Isabella Vang

WISCONSIN CENTER FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH | UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



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## SUMMARY

This report presents a community-based participatory action research project conducted by a group of University of Wisconsin–Madison undergraduate students to document how Wisconsin residents view the aims of higher education in the state. While questions regarding the purposes of higher education have long been debated, recent reforms in Wisconsin regarding higher education funding, governance, and objectives have brought new attention to these issues. Namely, there is an increased emphasis among Wisconsin's elected officials to restructure the state's public higher education system to be more tightly aligned with business interests. These reforms have garnered considerable outcry from those who oppose them, which has contributed to the state's deep political polarization. In the midst of this context, our research team developed a qualitative research study to better understand how Wisconsin residents currently view the aims of higher education, which we conceptualized as any schooling past high school. Our research team is unique in that the people arguably most affected by higher education policy—students—are the researchers. We contend that this model offers promising avenues for higher education policy research because of its capacity to include perspectives that are often excluded. After conducting in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of Wisconsin residents (N=40), our research team found that participants discussed an eclectic variety of aims rather than only one aim for higher education. The aims most commonly discussed included economic development and employment, civic and community engagement, social mobility, personal growth and enrichment, and critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Additionally, participants discussed concerns regarding obstacles that impede access to and achievement in higher education, such as affordability and institutional supports. Our study indicates that Wisconsin residents do not want higher education to be focused on a single aim. Rather, it demonstrates the need to value the multiple aims higher education serves and support higher education students.

The propose of our study is to document how Wisconsin residents view the aims of higher education in the state.

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Questions regarding the purpose of higher education, who higher education should be for, what students should learn, and how much higher education should cost have long been debated in the United States. Should higher education be a private benefit or a public good? Should it be set up to serve all student populations, or a select few? Should it be paid for by the individual or by the government? Recent political debates and hotly contested educational reforms in the state of Wisconsin have brought many of these issues back into the spotlight. Such reforms are explicitly oriented toward aligning the public system of higher education with business interests in the state, advocating for a narrow conception of the aims of higher education focused on economic development, vocational education, and career advancement of the students. In 2015, the Wisconsin state legislature passed the 2015–2017 biennial budget that included a \$250 million cut to the state’s university system and policy changes that eliminated faculty tenure from state law, weakened shared governance, and reinforced justifications for laying off professors (Strauss, 2015). This occurred only four years after the state erupted in massive protests after the legislature cut almost \$800 million from K–12 school funding, increased healthcare and pension contributions from state workers, and eliminated collective bargaining rights for public employees (Hansen, 2016). Additionally, documents uncovered in 2015 revealed that the state’s governor, Scott Walker, had proposed edits to the University of Wisconsin System mission statement to include the phrase, “meet the state’s workforce needs,” and eliminate much of the language about public service, the improvement of the human condition, and the phrase, “the search for truth” (Stein, Marley, & Herzog, 2015). In March 2018, University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point announced a proposal to eliminate 13 humanities and social science majors and expand 16 degrees in STEM and other technical fields. This proposal has been met with considerable protest and is still being debated (Hovorka, 2016).

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The reforms and proposed changes to Wisconsin’s state public higher education system have incited a great deal of public controversy that reflects the state’s increasing political polarization. According to political scientist, Katherine Cramer, author of *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016), Wisconsin’s increased political polarization has made Wisconsin residents less likely to talk to one another about politics out of fear that extreme differences of opinion will ruin relationships and fuel ongoing disagreements.

Considering this politically divisive climate, it would seem as though Wisconsin’s opposing ideological camps would have little to nothing in common in their views of public higher education. However, our research team, comprising two educational researchers with the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW–Madison) and eight UW–Madison undergraduate students, set out to examine just that by asking, *How do people in Wisconsin currently view the aims and goals of higher education in the state?* Through semi-structured interviews with 40 diverse Wisconsin residents, we found that perhaps the state is not as divided as one might think. Although we expected our results to confirm the stark divisions in the state’s current political climate, with conservative participants seeing the purpose of higher education as obtaining a job and liberal participants seeing it as an investment in one’s personal growth, we were surprised to find that our participants had startlingly similar responses. Regardless of background, age, or political affiliation, most interview participants acknowledged the role of higher education in professional development and career preparation, critical thinking skills development, personal growth, and preparation for active and engaged citizenship.



Interview participants in our study did not see a singular aim for higher education, but instead saw many nuanced and varied aims that sometimes seemed to conflict with each other. We found that while opinions on public higher education could still be politically divisive, the participants' eclectic variety of ideas regarding the purpose(s) of higher education suggested that Wisconsin residents might view higher education in a much broader way than our polarized political discourse tends to portray. In this report, we present background on these issues of the aims of higher education, explain our research methods, and present detailed findings along with a discussion of their implications.

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## Higher Education in the U.S. and Wisconsin

What constitute the proper aims of higher education is hotly debated in our national dialogue. The reasons for the debate—for its long duration and seeming intractability—are made clear by the analytical methods of moral philosophy, which has demonstrated that propositions about the aims of higher education are simultaneously statements about our deeply held moral values, about the nature of our obligations to ourselves and to society, and about the kind of society within which we hope to abide. Statements about the aims of higher education are thus simultaneously descriptive and normative—they say something about what higher education does and they say something else about what it ought to be doing (Brighouse & McPherson, 2015).

Historically in the United States there was a dominant, fairly unified, and noticeably elite viewpoint concerning the aims of higher education—the well-known ideal of a liberal education. The American Association of Colleges and Universities' "Statement on Liberal Learning" defines the concept as "a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequence of our ideas and actions" (AACU, 1998). This concept of liberal education in the country has focused on the holistic and eclectic cultivation of a person through higher learning, but it has also included what is sometimes more associated with vocational preparation, such as work-based learning, internships, and experiential education (Eyler, 2009).

The concept emerged from the philosophical debates of Greek classical antiquity. Liberal education emphasized the holistic cultivation of a "free citizen," through the study of grammar and logic, whereas vocational and technical training was for slaves and other non-free laborers (Lawton & Gordon, 2002). This elite liberal concept of higher learning was institutionalized in the Colonial and later Victorian system of higher education in America, in which a liberal education acquired at one of a few prestigious American colleges and universities became a sign and gate-keeping mechanism of upper-class status. While discussions of the history of higher education in America often focus on elite institutions of liberal learning, higher education has always been multiplex, including vocational training schools and early experiments with community colleges, which were primarily vocational in orientation (Brubacher, 2017; Lucas, 1994; Thelin, 2011). A liberal, eclectic philosophy of higher education for the elite in contrast with vocational education for the masses is a recurring theme in the American philosophy of higher education and higher education policy. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated the educational approach for the liberation of former slaves in America, one arguing for the liberal education of a black elite who could lead the liberation while the other urged the vocational education of a much larger segment of African-Americans (Moore, 2003).

While in 19th and early 20th century America, this liberal philosophy of education was most typically associated with elite colleges and universities, major changes in higher education policy following World War Two led to struggles to expand access to higher education and to democratize the concept of a liberal education. The 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act, or GI Bill, funded a major expansion of higher education for veterans (Olson, 1973), but this almost exclusively benefited White men and often excluded Servicemen of Color (Katznelson, 2005). The post-World War II Truman Commission was the first effort to democratize access to higher education, in particular as a bulwark against the rise of fascist anti-democratic populism. The Truman Commission, appointed in 1946 to reexamine the role of

higher education in society, completed a six-volume report in December 1947. The report was motivated by concerns of overcrowding in colleges and universities due to the popularity of the GI Bill.

The commission's report, *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education*, suggested that Americans "should now reexamine our system of higher education in terms of its objectives, methods, and facilities; and in the light of the social role it has to play" (Zook, 1947, p. 1). The commission suggested that 50% of the population could benefit from a two-year degree, and 32% from a four-year degree. At that time, only about 5% of Americans held a college degree. To accomplish these aims, the commission prompted an increase in federal spending, the expansion of educational institutions to help double the college educated population, and the creation of federal scholarships and fellowships and other annual federal aid for states to use at publicly-controlled institutions (Zook, 1947). The Truman Commission set a precedent in determining the role of the federal government in supporting higher education and in expanding educational opportunity, with an emphasis on the need of an educated citizenry to support a flourishing democracy. Before this federal involvement in education policy, higher education was primarily considered to be a state issue (Ruben & Perkins, 2007). The ambitious scope of the expansion of access to higher education, including for those historically excluded from benefits of higher learning, set the stage for the creation and future expansion of the federal student financial aid programs, including the Pell Grant and Stafford Loan programs (Fuller, 2014).

The idea of democratizing access to higher education so as to more broadly benefit society has a long history in Wisconsin prior to the expansion of national higher education after World War II. The University of Wisconsin was founded when Wisconsin was established as a state in 1848. As a land-grant university, the University of Wisconsin represented a commitment to more widely-accessible higher education in the state, and reflected a growing demand for agricultural and technical education to support the state economy. The programs were designed to suit the needs of the growing agricultural and industrial classes and broaden the traditional scope of privately-controlled classical higher education institutions (Curti, 1949; Key, 1996). Federal policy and funding encouraged on-campus instruction and research as well as off-campus extension work in the surrounding communities. This work to bring university knowledge directly to state citizens through extension programs epitomizes the historical philosophy of the University of Wisconsin, known as "the Wisconsin Idea" (UW–Madison, n.d.).

The Wisconsin Idea was first expressed by former UW–Madison President Charles Van Hise in a 1904 inaugural address where he declared, "I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every family of the state." The political scientist and Progressive Party reformer, Charles McCarthy coined the term "the Wisconsin Idea" to signify Wisconsin's populist history of progressive innovation (McCarthy, 1912). But, the Wisconsin Idea has come to represent more generally the university's broader commitment to public service and the close working relationship between the university and the state's industries and government (Doan, 1947). Coordinated with this progressive reform to tie the system of public higher education to the goals and wellbeing of the state, in 1911, the state legislature passed a law requiring some Wisconsin cities to set up trade schools, which ultimately resulted in what is now the Wisconsin Technical College System (Paris, 1985).

Major changes in higher education policy, however, have impacted this democratization of liberal learning. In particular, as a consequence of decades of state disinvestment from higher education throughout the United States, tuition rates and student loan debts have skyrocketed (Baylor, 2014; Quinterno & Orozco, 2012). The financial costs to individuals of higher learning has entailed what seems a fairly dramatic change in the public's views on the aims of higher education, transitioning from a liberal, eclectic view to a narrowly pragmatic, careerist, and economic orientation. The

Based on the Freshman Survey collected by Higher Education Research Institute, we know that in the early 1970s, three-quarters of college freshmen regarded higher education as essential to the development of a meaningful life philosophy, while about a third of those same freshmen felt the same about higher education's potential to advance their economic status. Now, half a century later, those fractions have reversed (Berrett, 2015).

recent change in the way students, parents, and society perceive higher education has been well-documented by opinion surveys and educational statistics. Based on the Freshman Survey collected by Higher Education Research Institute, we know that in the early 1970s, three-quarters of college freshmen regarded higher education as essential to the development of a meaningful life philosophy, while about a third of those same freshmen felt the same about higher education's potential to advance their economic status. Now, half a century later, those fractions have reversed (Berrett, 2015). While students used to cite the primary factor in choosing their college was to learn more about things that interested them, now it is more likely that students will choose their college based on their potential career and financial outcomes post-graduation. Thus, with escalating tuition rates, the issue of what constitutes the proper aims of higher education is not an academic question to the students and their families and communities.

The political polarization of higher education is also a major factor influencing this shift in orientation away from a liberal holistic theory of higher learning toward a pragmatic careerist orientation. In a 1967 press conference, then California Governor Ronald Reagan argued, “We do believe that there are certain intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could do without,” contending that the purpose of college should be reoriented towards technical skills to prepare students for the workforce (Berrett, 2015). Past Republican governors of the state have worked to bolster public higher education in the state, such as Tommy Thompson. Since taking office in 2011, however, Governor Scott Walker has focused on higher education as a platform to introduce conservative reforms, including at UW–Madison, the state’s flagship public university located in the state capitol. The Walker administration has followed the Reagan era approach of working to tightly align the system of public higher education with business interests, thus politicizing and attempting to create a dominant anti-intellectual narrative of how the state’s higher education should work (Lowry, 2015).

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In terms of practical considerations, Walker argued that cuts to public education, including public higher education, were needed to rein in government spending and balance the state budget, and that a shift toward a more vocational focus and higher education would entice corporate migration to the state by signaling that “Wisconsin is open for business.” Walker has passed over \$300 million in cuts to the state’s university system over two years, and suggested that faculty and staff on state campuses should be teaching more and working harder (Strauss, 2015). The state legislature has removed statutory requirements supporting shared governance, tenure protections, and programs for low-income students, as well as proposed a slate of policies to align the system of public higher education with business interests in the state (e.g., mandatory internship requirements for graduation) (Wis. Stat. § 36.01). In addition, documents uncovered from the governor’s office in 2015 showed that Walker had proposed edits to the Wisconsin state statutes that would radically change the mission of University of Wisconsin system (Stein, Marley, & Herzog, 2015).

Echoing the ideals that Reagan outlined in the late 1960s, Walker’s policy proposals, state budgets, and edits to the mission of University of Wisconsin system make it clear that his administration considers the primary focus of higher education to be one that prioritizes practical vocational skills over certain “intellectual luxuries.” In addition, governors of other states have made similar statements on higher education in the past decade (e.g., Rick Scott of Florida and Pat McCrory of North Carolina). Public colleges and universities in Wisconsin are the target of anti-intellectual discourses and policy reforms that align higher education more tightly with business interests. It is in this politically polarized context that our team of researchers set out to document how a diverse variety of Wisconsin residents consider the aims of higher education in the state.

## Research Methods

This research study was a community-based participatory action research project (Janes, 2016; Torre, 2014; Wood, 2017) conducted by two educational researchers and eight undergraduate students at UW–Madison. “Community-based research,” or “participatory research,” refer to a partnership approach to research that typically involves academic-community engagement between academic researchers and community actors (i.e., community groups, schools, non-profit organizations, health providers). Numerous scholars from education (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Ventura, 2017), public health (Charron, Kaur, Rose, Florence, & Pakhale, 2016), and social psychology (Fine & Torre, 2006) have employed community-based participatory action research methods to gain a more grounded, collaborative understanding of a given phenomenon, develop action plans to address critical social issues, and reimagine asymmetrical relationships between researchers and research participants (Appadurai, 2006; Reyes Cruz, 2008; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012; Tuck, 2009).

The eight undergraduate student researchers on the team came from a variety of social and academic backgrounds. They were recruited through a campus job posting and were chosen based on their availability and interest in the topic. All but one of the students grew up in Wisconsin. They were financially compensated for their work and were required to complete human subjects training and abide by standard academic research ethics. The university researchers provided training and mentorship in qualitative research methodology and educational history and theory, and the student researchers were viewed as “experts” in the lived experiences of higher education students. While power dynamics regarding compensation, age, and the student/teacher relationship were ever present, a desire to achieve a shared goal and mutual respect for one another helped create a cohesive research team. While it is common for students to participate in social science and education research under the supervision and direction of senior investigators, the students in our study collaboratively directed and executed the research. The project fulfilled part of the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions mission to document student experiences through their own voices.

The student researchers were involved in all steps of the research process. Team members were responsible for literature reviews, research design, data collection, data analysis, and data presentation. This collaborative group process allowed student researchers to gain ownership of the research rather than feeling as if they were simply “following orders.” Student researchers reported that because of this increased responsibility and freedom, combined with the required training, they felt more curiosity, passion, pride, and determination with regards to the research inquiry.

## Research Design

The research team met for total of 40 hours from May to December 2017. The majority of these hours were conducted as workshops in which the team discussed relevant literature, listened to guest speakers, learned about qualitative research methods, designed the research study, discussed data collection, coded and analyzed qualitative data, and created written and oral presentations of data findings. During one of these workshops, the team collaboratively developed the following research questions:

1. What do Wisconsin residents see as the aims of higher education in the state?
2. How do participants' lived experiences, social backgrounds, and educational histories influence their views of higher education in the state?
3. How are the aims of higher education politically positioned and communicated?

Based on these research questions, the team developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) that centered around participants' thoughts on different aspects of higher education, such as content, funding, and access, as well as their personal experiences and beliefs concerning higher education. Researchers also asked participants to speak about potential problems and solutions they saw for higher education issues in the state.

**Participant Sample**

A total sample of 40 individuals from Wisconsin were recruited to participate. The eight student researchers were asked to think critically about who makes up their community, and then each recruited five participants. The team was not only interested in recruiting participants who shared similar backgrounds, demographics, and political beliefs, but also to include people of different ages, races, genders, and experiences in order to achieve a heterogeneous sample. Some participants had close personal relationships with student researchers (e.g., parents, significant others, roommates), while others were more distant connections (e.g., former high school teachers and classmates, church members, and friends of friends).

Of our 40-person sample (see Table 1), half (20) self-identified as male and half (20) self-identified as female. The majority of our sample (17) were between the ages of 18-37 at the time of the study, followed by 14 between the ages of 38-57, eight between the ages of 58-77, and one between the ages of 78-97. The majority self-identified as White (33). Three self-identified as Asian or Asian-American, two as Hispanic or Latino, one as Black or African American, and one as Native American. These racial demographics reflect the general demographics of state, which is 87.5% White, 6.7% Hispanic/Latino, 6.6% Black, 2.8% Asian, and 1.1% American Indian (U.S. Census, 2016).

**Table 1. Participants Self-Identified Demographic Information (40 total)**

Sex		Race		Age	
Male	20	White or Caucasian	33	Born between 1980-1999	17
		Asian or Asian-American	3	Born between 1960-1979	14
		Black or African-American	1	Born between 1940-1959	8
Female	20	Hispanic or Latino	2	Born between 1920-1939	1
		Native American	1		

Although almost all (38 out of 40) participants had some higher education experience, these ranged from a few courses at a community college to a Ph.D. In total, 10 participants held a graduate or professional degree, one was pursuing a master’s degree, 10 held bachelor’s degrees, nine were pursuing bachelor’s degrees, four held associate’s degrees, three were pursuing associate’s degrees, two had some community college credits but had not completed their degrees, and two had completed high school as their highest level of education. The majority of our participants (30) also provided a location in Wisconsin as the place where they “grew up.”

**Data Collection and Analysis**

All participants were interviewed during the summer of 2017 by the student researcher who had recruited them. After obtaining consent, student researchers conducted individual audio-recorded interviews that lasted 30 to 60 minutes. Following the interview, student researchers wrote extensive field notes that were shared with the group. Once interviews were transcribed, student researchers conducted a round of open coding in teams of two or three to explore emerging themes. They wrote analytic memos of what they observed, which were also shared with the group. From these discussions and memos, the team created a comprehensive code list. Using these codes, student researchers worked in pairs to comb through the interview data and mark every instance of an idea or quote that fit the code. After all interviews had been coded from the comprehensive code list, the team looked for patterns and outliers within the data to examine emerging themes and discrepant cases.



Emerging themes were ultimately split into two categories, which the team referred to as “Who and Whom Findings” and “Aims Findings.” The “Who and Whom Findings” focused on ideas concerning college affordability, general differences in higher education beliefs and experiences, higher education funding mechanisms, conversations regarding who higher education is meant for, and suggestions and recommendations for higher education policy. The “Aims Findings” focused on ideas concerning the purpose of higher education. We grouped these purposes as “community and civic engagement,” “employment opportunities,” “personal growth and enrichment,” “interpersonal and critical thinking skills,” and “social mobility.”

### **Limitations**

While the study’s goal was to capture a rich, qualitative understanding of how our community views the aims of higher education in the state, we acknowledge that the 40-person sample simply does not represent all Wisconsinites’ views. Moreover, while our sample is racially representative of the state, the research team believes this work would benefit from more voices of People of Color. Finally, we would like to acknowledge our positionality as UW–Madison researchers and students. While we tried to develop strong rapport with participants to create open, honest dialogue, we realize that our association with the flagship state university may have influenced participant responses more favorably towards higher education. That said, the findings below suggest that participants were comfortable enough with the setting of the interview to voice detailed, critical perspectives on aspects of higher education that concerned them.

### **Findings**

Despite Wisconsin’s currently polarized political discourse and legislative emphasis on the connection between higher education and jobs, we found our participants to demonstrate a diverse, eclectic, and multi-various understanding of the goals and aims of higher education in the state. Of our 40 participants, 29 discussed civic and/or community engagement as an aim of higher education, 28 discussed employment, 25 discussed critical thinking and interpersonal skills, 19 discussed personal growth and enrichment, and 12 discussed social mobility. Participants’ eclectic orientation to the aims of higher education was shared not only by Wisconsinites currently in college, but also by those with a 4-year and a technical-college background as well as those without personal college experiences. We refer to this orientation as “eclectic” because, while politically polarized representations tend to be based on an opposition of vocational goals and developmental goals, and between individual goals and social goals, many of the participants not only felt that such goals were valid, but that they were often understood to be equally valid. Thus, we suggest that the primary value of such representations of the aims of higher education is eclecticism rather than exclusivity and binary opposition.

Chue,<sup>1</sup> for example, graduated from a college in the UW System with a degree in computer science, and later returned to school to become a pastor. The quotes from his interview illustrate the pattern across our participants: when asked to consider the aims of higher education, and when given a chance to speak on the matter, they did not tend to view the issue as an opposition between career outcomes and personal enrichment, and between individual and social goods. Chue starts by explaining his motivation to attend a four-year public university in purely economic terms:

I mean if you finish college you will have more opportunities to find jobs, to have more doors open for you.... That’s why I chose to go to college.

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<sup>1</sup> All people names are pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

However, he did not make a distinction between these financial and career benefits of college to individuals and the benefits of college to society because he viewed quality employment, stable housing, and financial independence as conditions of good citizenship:

I think the more people get an opportunity to learn, the better they can become a good citizen in terms of jobs, in terms of housing, in terms of being able to take care of their own life and situation.

In addition to economic outcomes of college to individuals and society, Chue believed that higher education should help students develop a broad variety of skills, all of which are associated with the tradition of liberal learning, including:

Obviously it's reading and writing. But also communication, having the wisdom to reason things out.

Furthermore, he thought higher education should inculcate the values and skills associated with good citizens who:

use that knowledge and help either your church, your community ... so that you can share those assets with people in the community as well.

To our participants, these aims were not mutually exclusive. Rather, participants most often discussed these aims in the context of one being as important as the other.

In the following sections, we present our findings and discuss their implications. While it is clear that the diverse Wisconsinites we interviewed have a generally eclectic value-orientation to the aims of higher education, they are also equally concerned that these benefits of higher education be accessible to a diverse group of students, and they argued that there may be serious obstacles to this important goal—specifically, the high costs of college and insufficient institutional resources and supports for students to succeed.

### **Civic and Community Engagement**

A popular aim stated by 29 participants was the value placed upon civic and community engagement. Many participants discussed higher education as a mechanism to gain knowledge in order to become informed citizens and participate in democracy. For example, 87-year-old Doris stated that she believed higher education can offer a person economic security as well as the knowledge needed to become a good citizen. Doris, who attended seven different universities while moving with her military-enlisted husband before finally completing a bachelor's degree in the arts, described being a good citizen as "obeying laws, taking care of yourself, voting, making sure our democracy isn't undermined, reading the newspaper, and finding out what's going on in the world." Likewise, 56-year old youth minister JoAnne stated that a basic purpose of education as an institution is to create an "educated citizenry that is necessary for a good, healthy democracy." JoAnne, who came from a rural area of Wisconsin and was the first in her family to attend college, also cautioned that "if citizens aren't sufficiently educated, democracy as an institution really flounders."

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Other participants also discussed the role of higher education in political engagement. For example, 24-year-old Eduardo originally moved to the United States from Mexico at the age of 11 and had been living in the country as undocumented until a short while ago. Eduardo, a university sophomore, recently switched majors to Political Science in response to the 2016 Presidential election. He said that Donald Trump's victory was eye-opening, and it showed him both the complexity of politics as well as the need for more political leaders of color. This has pushed him to learn more about national policy and politics with the hope of earning a Ph.D. and becoming a political science professor.

Numerous participants also brought up the connection between higher education and community engagement in order to give back and “make society a better place” (Megan, age 42). Many participants seemed to consider higher education a privilege that should be repaid by helping others. According to 21-year-old Antonio, “once you go to higher education, you should provide for your community.” For Antonio, who is attending community college part-time under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program while also working a full-time job, a four-year degree is something that is currently out of his reach. Even though he was accepted to UW–Madison, he is unable to attend because his undocumented status would require him to pay international student tuition rates even though he has lived most of his life in Wisconsin.

The sentiment of “giving back” and paying one’s education forward was echoed by participants of all backgrounds, educational levels, and home towns. Tony (age 52), for example, did not attend a four-year university but went back to school for an associate’s degree in her thirties. According to her, “everyone should use their higher education for the betterment of community and self ... because no person is by themselves in this world, so I think there has to be a community responsibility in whatever we do with our education.” Likewise, high school history teacher Jim (age 54) stated that students “owe something back to the world, the community, the university. Because it’s bigger than them.” Finally, Chue, the 50-year-old Lutheran pastor, believes that those who receive a higher education should “use that knowledge to help their church and community.” Chue migrated to the United States as a refugee from Laos when he was a child and eventually earned his bachelor’s degree and attended seminary school. According to him, it is important to share the “assets one receives through higher education” with “the people in the community.”

“Everyone should use their higher education for the betterment of community and self ... because no person is by themselves in this world, so I think there has to be a community responsibility in whatever we do with our education.”

Notions of community were also present in statements about the economic benefits to an area when individuals are educated. Fred, a 51-year-old Emergency Medical Technician and firefighter from a rural Wisconsin community, offered the example of how business owners in small towns can help their communities. He said:

If I go to college, and I study business and finance, and I am the chief banker in my small community, and I set up a really great thriving bank, I also think that bank should give back to its local community. Maybe in the form of programs, maybe they could even be educational programs, teaching kids how to how to manage a budget, how to save, how to invest ... I think that everybody should give something of themselves to the community, to make the community and the world a better place.

Relatedly, seven participants explicitly discussed the Wisconsin Idea as an important aim of higher education in that the public colleges and universities, as well as their students, staff, and alumni, should seek ways to apply their knowledge and other resources to benefit the state. These participants discussed the ability of educated individuals to connect to their community and improve their local economies. For example, 40-year-old Alex, stated that students should be able to “find meaningful work in Wisconsin and bring their knowledge and skills back to their hometowns.” In addition, the

Wisconsin Idea was connected to university research and, as Jim the high school history teacher said, the “advancement of human knowledge, exploring the edge of fields, acquiring new understandings, new techniques.” Lastly, some participants brought up the importance of communicating university research to the broader public through venues such as public radio and university extension programs.

### **Personal Growth and Enrichment**

Another dominant aim, explicitly brought up by 19 participants, was the role of higher education in enriching a person’s life through engagement with new ideas, subjects, and peoples. These participants highlighted the themes of identity development and becoming a well-rounded person. Participants brought up examples such as taking a class outside of one’s primary field or studying abroad as ways in which higher education fosters personal development. Rachel (age 59) discussed how higher education can help cultivate well-roundedness through exposure to a wide range of subjects. Likewise, 24-year-old Frank stated that he believed “people should pursue higher education if they are not yet sure what they want to do to get a well-rounded view of their opportunities and to open doors before the big decisions must be made.” However, Fred, the EMT and firefighter, brought up questions regarding relevance of courses outside one’s primary field of study. When discussing his own EMT training, he stated that he would not have wanted to learn about things that did not directly help him to work with patients, but that he still saw other “sound classes” such as “math and algebra” as being able to “enhance” what he does. Still, he wondered if some classes were a “waste of time and money.” Fred’s statements bring up important points regarding how Wisconsinites view the concept of “well-roundedness” as well as the role of money and time in how that concept is developed.

Nine participants also discussed learning about and accepting the value of other cultures as an aim of higher education. To these participants, cultural awareness meant more than just knowledge of racial and ethnic differences, but developing relationships with people who come from different walks of life. Madge (age 42) summed up this idea by stating that higher education “forces you to look outside of your little bubble.” Madge, who holds an associate’s degree in the culinary arts and was born and raised in northern Wisconsin, strongly encourages others to attend college, particularly four-year universities, because of its social, personal, and employment opportunities. Likewise, Suzy (age 57) stated that the “number one” thing higher education students should learn is “how to be open-minded.” She went on to say that “there’s so much to learn out there, just in order to get along in today’s world. You have to be open-minded.”

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### **Interpersonal and Critical Thinking Skills**

Another aim participants repeatedly brought up was that higher education should foster the development of interpersonal skills and critical thinking skills. Several participants responded to the question, “What do you think students in Wisconsin should learn through their higher education?” with answers concerning working with others, thinking more critically, and communicating clearly. For example, 21-year-old university senior Brooke responded to the question by stating:

I think one thing I feel I’ve learned is how to be more critical of everyday things and to form my own opinions. You don’t just have to listen to what everyone tells you. You can think for yourself. I think that’s what college is for.

Similarly, when asked the same question, 57-year-old Suzy explained that when she went to a four-year university in the late 1970s, “it was more about getting a job so that you can be employable.” However, after completing college and



working as an elementary and middle school para-educator, her opinion has changed to where she thinks that higher education is more about “becoming open-minded.” She brought up an example from a seventh grade math classroom where she had assisted in which a student had asked the teacher why they had to learn about slope-intercept. According to Suzy, the teacher’s response to this question was:

We’re not teaching you this because you’re necessarily going to have to use it, we’re teaching your brain how to think. Your brain has got so much potential, and we have to push you to do different things. And even though you may never use it, your brain knows.

Although no one participant alone gave a precise definition of critical thinking, when we looked across interviews, we developed a collective definition to mean the ability to understand, listen, and discuss different ideas and to be open-minded. For example, 54-year-old Robert associated the idea of critical thinking with being “able to discuss all sides of an issue,” while 24-year-old Eduardo discussed the importance of “debate,” and 66-year-old MJ discussed the idea of “encouraging [students] to hear.” MJ, an educator who has worked as an elementary school teacher, middle school teacher, and school secretary in both rural and more urban areas of Wisconsin, also added that “there shouldn’t be a particular ethic or political slant” when classes discuss controversial issues but rather students should be exposed to a variety of ideas.

Despite its importance across many interviews, there was concern over higher education not teaching critical thinking. In addition to noting the importance of removing political bias from discussions of critical issues in higher education, MJ brought up the concern that students were “being spoon-fed ideas.” Five other participants expressed similar concerns about the “balance” of views higher education students receive as well as the amount of opportunities students have to think creatively. For example, 54-year-old engineer Robert argued that higher education students are not acquiring “the ability to discuss all sides of an issue and to look at things and problem-solve them in ways that are beneficial to everybody” as much as they used to in the past.

### **Employment and Social Mobility**

Twenty-eight participants brought up employment as a goal of higher education, making it one of our most widely referenced aims. In fact, the relationship between education and employment was so strong that some participants even framed higher education as an absolute necessity for obtaining a “good” job. One participant, 21-year-old Griffin, went so far as to say, “you’re almost guaranteed a job if you got a degree no matter what.” While others, such as 24-year-old Frank, were “less convinced that a college education equals a job right out of college.” Still, the majority of our participants claimed that higher education at the very least improves job opportunities. For example, 52-year-old Tony stated that, “even with a college education you are not guaranteed a good job that you went to school for, but you are much better off having a degree than not.”

While participants were mixed over their perceptions of the potential job security higher education offers, they did overall seem to believe that higher education at minimum helps job prospects. For example, Lutheran pastor Chue stated, “if you finish college you will have more opportunities to find jobs, should you decide to change careers, or decide to do something else you have skills so you can move to other jobs.” Likewise, 22-year-old William claimed that having a degree makes a person “promotable.” William, who is from a small blue-collar Wisconsin city, recently transferred from a two-year state institution to a four-year institution in pursuit of a degree in Sociology. Although he positively discussed his two-year university experience as a place that had high quality instructors, small classes, and low costs, and also credited the institution as being the “place where [he] learned how to learn,” he believes he will have greater job prospects with a four-year degree. Specifically, William wants to be a police officer and stated that, “a police department would much rather have a person with a bachelor’s degree than an associate’s. It shows that you’re more

committed to longer term work if you pursue the four-year versus two-year degree.” William’s comments also highlight the general social preference towards four-year degrees that was also brought up by other participants.

Other participants discussed higher education’s impact on job flexibility by allowing individuals to combat what was described by Rebah (age 24) as the “proliferation of automation.” Rebah, who earned his bachelor’s degree a year before this study was conducted and who grew up in an upper-middle class household of an urban Wisconsin city, stated that although he believes higher education is “very important,” he also believes that “college students are being led astray.” He went on to discuss how “we live in an age where our jobs are increasingly becoming automated” and “if we don’t change things drastically, blue and white collar jobs will be in danger.” Because of this, Rebah stated that he believed “the prospect of having a job is potentially less important” while “learning about other cultures, sciences, and history is increasingly important.” These sentiments were echoed by Kevin (age 24) and Frank (age 24) who were also very concerned about the role of automation in reducing job prospects despite a person’s educational qualifications.

In contrast to the concern that many of today’s jobs will eventually be eliminated by automation, other participants saw a need for higher education to more directly prepare students for specific, currently in-demand occupations. For example, 48-year-old Monique stated that she wished “everyone could have a fulfilling career in Wisconsin, but that is not realistic,” and there needed to be more emphasis on training in skilled trades such as “carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work.” For Monique, who did not receive any higher education, it is important for people to receive the training and preparation they need to start their career regardless if “it’s trade career or a four-year program.” Similarly, 42-year-old Madge believed in a more direct relationship between higher education and employment. When asked what she thought students in Wisconsin should learn through their higher education, Madge stated that in addition to learning how to communicate and work with people, students should be able to “execute the requirements of their specific job by learning the skills that they need to do those jobs.”

Just as many participants saw a connection between higher education and employment prospects, many also saw a connection between higher education and social mobility. In fact, 12 participants described social mobility and surpassing socioeconomic barriers as an important aim of higher education. For some participants, this meant using higher education as a vehicle to leave poorer communities and move to areas with more opportunities or attaining an occupation with more social esteem. For example, Jane (age 61) discussed how her mother grew up in poverty but was able to move out of a poor neighborhood in an urban area of Wisconsin by going to college. Likewise, Mark (age 38) discussed how his father, a cement truck driver, strongly encouraged him to go to college in order to avoid manual labor. In addition to demonstrating how many of our participants perceive higher education to serve as a mechanism for upward social mobility, these examples also demonstrate how notions of socially acceptable success play an important part in Wisconsinites’ views of the goals and aims of higher education.

Yet, despite many participants identifying higher education as a tool for social mobility, they were divided on questions concerning who college should be for. While many participants believed higher education should be available to anyone who wants it, others were concerned that higher education is not for everyone. For those who stated higher education is not for everyone, some were concerned there would not be enough jobs if everyone went to college, others discussed incidents they had witnessed in which immigrant or low-income students were discouraged to pursue higher education, and others simply believed that some people are not built to continue on in a structured educational setting after high school.

## Barriers to Accessing and Succeeding in Higher Education

In addition to discussing the aims of higher education in Wisconsin, participants also discussed barriers to pursuing and completing higher education degrees. The vast majority of our participants (32 out of 40) discussed higher education costs as a significant barrier preventing students from accessing or completing higher education in a timely manner. Several participants discussed how college affordability has personally affected them. Some participants discussed the challenges involved with not qualifying for financial aid, others discussed the challenges involved with working and attending school full-time, and others discussed having to drop out of school because they simply could not pay the costs. Both Eduardo and Antonio significantly struggled to attend higher education because of their undocumented status. After high school, Eduardo could not apply for federal financial aid. Because of this, he began working full-time at a fast food restaurant and later for a carpet installer to save money and then eventually began studying part-time at a community college while still working 40-60 hours per week. After finally receiving his permit of residency, he has transferred to one of Wisconsin's four-year institutions. Antonio, on the other hand, still does not have a green card and is not able to attend a four-year university due to cost constraints. The University of Wisconsin System stopped allowing in-state tuition for undocumented students in 2011 and now charges undocumented students international student prices no matter how long they have been in Wisconsin or if they graduated from a Wisconsin high school. For UW–Madison, this is a difference of \$18,402 for non-resident full-time students per semester compared to \$5,277 for in-state residents (Office of the Registrar at the UW–Madison, 2018).

Many of our participants who were Wisconsin residents also struggled to pay the high costs associated with higher education. Participants discussed the burden of student debt as well as the challenges of balancing school, work, and home responsibilities. For example, Kevin (age 24) discussed how his sister had to leave her higher education program because she had two children, was working two jobs, and did not have the time or money needed for school. Other participants also discussed finances as one of the many reasons for choosing to attend one school over another, or choosing to attend a community college over a traditional four-year university. For example, university senior Brooke said she chose to attend a university in Wisconsin rather than a school out of state because she received a scholarship that only pertained to state schools. Likewise, Olivia (age 21) and Griffin (age 21) said that they attended two-year institutions over four-year institutions because of the costs. Olivia stated that she went to a community college because it was her only option that she would be able to pay out-of-pocket, and Griffin said that the only reason he attended a two-year Wisconsin school before transferring to a four-year school was because “it was a lot cheaper.” Finally, Cathy (age 21), who was completing her bachelor's degree, stated that she would like to move onto a master's program but that she “cannot afford it right now” because of the loans she had already taken out for her undergraduate degree. In fact, she said that if she “hadn't been able to get as much financial aid as [she] did senior year, [she] wouldn't have been able to continue” at all.

Our participants also noted significant generational differences between the cost of higher education now and in the past. Jim (age 54) said that he “was able to afford college by working nights at a grocery store” because “you could do that back then when it was much more affordable than it is today.” Likewise, James (age 61) stated that finances did not play a significant role for him when he was in college [in the 1970s and 1980s] because he was able to afford most of his schooling by working in the summer. He attributes today's increased higher education costs to decreased federal and state support as well as a lack of a standard living wage. Amanda (age 24) has struggled to find steady employment after recently completing her bachelor's degree and is currently torn between applying to graduate school and taking on more debt with the hopes of eventually finding work in her field or looking for work outside of her major. According to Amanda:

Considering the abundant concerns over the financial costs of higher education discussed by our participants, it is not surprising that lowering costs was one of the most common (if not the most common) suggestion for improving higher education systems and policies. As Fred (age 51) stated:

Gloria (age 20) also discussed the need to reduce the cost of higher education because of her own experiences with loans, but was concerned over the feasibility of free or reduced college tuition. Still, she stated that something had to be done to reduce costs because she believed that higher education, whether a two-year or four-year program, was very

People are losing faith in education, but at the same time it's becoming more expensive and more mandatory—which is basically a trap—and I think that our generation is just kind of stuck. Instead of mortgages, we're going to have student loans that we owe to society and we're going to work for a small amount of pay for a lot of years to pay off the debt that we got into. The system basically lied to us, you know?

beneficial for many reasons.

Beyond finances, 10 participants discussed the need for students to have more resources in high school to overcome the barrier of accessing higher education. The most common proposal was for increased counselors to guide students

There are so many smart people that would love to go and seek higher education but because they live possibly in poverty or they're somewhat impoverished or their family has fallen on financial difficulties... For whatever reason, they can't go. And you never know, they might be the next scientist, the next physician that figures something out, and we'll never know because they'll never have the opportunity to go because money is the biggest hurdle.

through college applications, scholarships, and career preparation. Participants noticed an increase in high schools' preparation of students for postsecondary education, but still called for further assistance. For example, Cathy (age 21) believed that "high school counselors are overworked and understaffed so I don't think students get as much individualized attention as they deserve to or would like to have in regards to their college search." Other participants also brought up the need to create more partnerships among Wisconsin high schools and higher education institutions.

Participants also brought up barriers students face once accepted into a higher education program that can hinder their success. Both Olivia (age 21) and Kevin (age 24) brought up the need for more mental health support while Jane (age 61) discussed the need for campuses to provide better services for disabled students. Additionally, numerous participants brought up the well-documented challenges associated with being a first-generation or minority student. Participants suggested improving campus climates, providing additional support services, and building stronger community relationships as potential responses to these challenges.

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## Discussion and Conclusion

Historically, the liberal, eclectic theory of the aims of higher education centered on the holistic development of a person emerged in classical philosophy, was established in Colonial and Victorian America as the philosophy of elite institutions, and carried through the first part of 20th century as a distinctly elite social gate-keeping mechanism and sign of class privilege. The beginnings of the expansion and democratization of this elite privilege started in Wisconsin and other states with the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, but it was not until after World War II, with the impact of the GI Bill, the findings of the Truman Commission, and later, the expansion of the higher education financial aid system, that there was a concerted effort in the federal and state governments to make the benefits of higher education available to a larger—although at first, predominately White and male—section of the American public.

The struggles and public investment necessary to create, expand, and democratize the public system of higher education have advanced the goal of creating a more educated American public and expanding the benefits of higher learning to a more diverse group of Americans. Higher education policy, however, has recently shifted from this democratizing focus. The state disinvestment from public higher education in Wisconsin and nationally have entailed both rising tuition costs and increased individual financial burdens for those pursuing higher education; these are costs that low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students can often ill afford (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). This is a major factor in a cultural shift from a theory of liberal learning as the primary philosophy of higher education in the United States, toward a narrower, careerist, and vocationalist orientation. This cultural shift is documented by survey research (Berrett, 2015). It is also the focus of political polarization, in particular, through both the anti-intellectual attacks on public higher education and by policies to restructure the relationship between the state and public higher education in Wisconsin by the Republican-led legislature and Republican Governor Scott Walker. This list of policies includes larger budget cuts to public universities, and changes to state statutes that weaken tenure, shared governance, and programs supporting the access and success of low-income students. Scholars, activists, and politicians have argued that such changes to our public system of higher education are destructive, wasteful, and anti-democratic. Interestingly, a main finding of this study is that the Wisconsinites we interviewed tended to agree that politically polarized nature of the higher education policy debate is counter-productive.

While the current politics in the state tends to represent the aims of higher education as contradictory or oppositional, overwhelmingly, across this diverse sample, the interviewees have an eclectic orientation, positing the equal value of career preparation along with the cultivation of civic and democratic values, personal developments, and critical thinking and skill development.

The preferred method of documenting major cultural changes such as shifts in the public's view of the aims of higher education are large surveys, which present participants' questions and delaminated sets of (often mutually exclusive) answers to choose from. In contrast, we conducted extensive interviews on the topic, which provided participants opportunities to discuss in detail their views and concerns about the aims of higher education in the state. The story that emerged from this method was far more complex and nuanced than we expected based on the current debate. In fact, the people we interviewed were not as polarized as the politics in the state suggest. Interviewees consistently presented their views on the aims of higher education in ways that undercut the binary oppositions ubiquitous in the political discourse, between career preparation on the one side, and intellectual development on the other. The interviewees mentioned a great variety of themes related to the aims of higher education, which we categorized as civic and community engagement, personal growth and enrichment, interpersonal and critical thinking skills, and employment and social mobility. The overwhelming majority of the people we interviewed believed that all, or almost all, of these themes were important goals.

The people we interviewed were diverse in a number of ways—being conservative, moderate, and progressive; residing in rural, suburban, and urban Wisconsin; being both explicitly religious and explicitly secular; having various higher educational backgrounds or no experience with higher education at all; and spanning multiple generations including one octogenarian. Some participants were born in Wisconsin and others immigrated to the state; and there was considerable socioeconomic, gender, sexual-orientation, and racial variation as well. While the current politics in the state tends to represent the aims of higher education as contradictory or oppositional, overwhelmingly, across this diverse sample, the interviewees have an eclectic orientation, positing the equal value of career preparation along with the cultivation of civic and democratic values, personal developments, and critical thinking and skill development.

While it is clear that the participants of our study were concerned both with high costs and obstacles to success in higher education, and they believed that higher education should result in favorable employment outcomes for students, at the same time we found that they generally advocated for an holistic and inclusive (a.k.a., “liberal”) theory of higher education rather than the narrow, economic formulation prevalent in the political debate. Yet, they had serious concerns that the benefits of higher education were not available to many Wisconsinites. College affordability was a major concern. Thirty-two out of 40 participants discussed this problem at length, some of them with stories of their own struggles with the cost of college. Obstacles, such as a lack of precollege academic preparation and advising, and the lack of institutional resources to support student success in college and transition to the workforce, were of concern. This suggests that while there is agreement on the normative claim that public higher education should cultivate a holistic and eclectic range of benefits, there is concern that there are many obstacles to achieving these aims, in particular, college affordability and lack of institutional supports for postsecondary education and the transition to the workforce. UW System administration should recognize the diverse set of expectations that Wisconsinites have about the aims of higher education in the state, and reflect these priorities in their budgeting decisions.

This report involved students from UW–Madison—a primary target of the state government’s higher education policy reforms—who developed a research inquiry to document the aims of higher education in Wisconsin. Debate about higher education policy often involves a variety of constituents, educators and administrators, policymakers and elected officials, and community and business leaders. Such policy debates, however, rarely or seriously address concerns of the primary beneficiaries of higher education, the college students. In contrast, our research project not only interviewed students and others about their opinions, but those who designed the research questions, methods, and conducted the data collection and analysis are current college students. We suggest that such participatory action research models are particularly needed in higher education policy research to include perspectives that are often excluded. Our current research study, “Our HMoob American College Paj Ntaub,” expands on this participatory action research approach to higher education policy by working with a student organization at UW-Madison focused on improving conditions for Hmong students on campus. Such participatory action research projects have the capacity to democratize the higher education policy process by including constituents—such as students in general, and minoritized students in particular—whose voices are normally excluded or marginalized.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. To begin, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and where you're from?
2. Can you describe your educational background, including both K-12 and any higher education experiences you might have had?
  - a. (If the person is currently in college) Why did you choose to come to [institution]? Are you happy with that decision? What are you studying there and why? What communities or organizations are you a part of?
  - b. (If the person attended from college) Why did you choose to attend [institution]? Are you happy with that decision? What did you study and why? What communities or organizations were you a part of?
  - c. (If the person did not go to college) What did you do after high school?
3. What are/were the factors involved in your decision-making process to pursue or not pursue higher education?
  - a. (If not answered), did anyone else influence your decision-making process?
  - b. (If not answered), did finances play a role at all?
  - c. Did you confront any barriers to accessing higher education?
4. When, if ever, was the idea of attending higher education brought up to you? What sorts of information, preparation, and resources were provided to you to access and/or attend higher education?
5. How important is higher education to you? How important is it to your family?
  - a. Who in your family has pursued higher education?
  - b. (If they have children) Will/Did your children pursue higher education?
6. In your community, how common is it for people to continue onto higher education? Why do you think that is?
7. Who do you think should pursue higher education in Wisconsin?
  - a. What percentage of the population should this include? Why?
  - b. What do you think can be done to achieve this?
8. What do you think students in Wisconsin should learn through their higher education?
  - a. What do you think students in Wisconsin should not learn through their higher education?
9. How do you think someone should use their higher education?
10. Who do you think should fund higher education in Wisconsin?
11. What do you hope higher education can offer on both a societal and personal level?
12. If you had the power to make any changes to our state's higher education, what changes, if any, would you make or what ideas would you focus on?

Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you'd like to add?



## **CCWT Research Team**

Bailey B. Smolarek holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction and is an Associate Researcher at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research

Matthew Wolfgram holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology and is Assistant Director of the Center for College-Workforce Transitions at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Micayla Darrow graduated in December 2017 with a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders and a certificate in Educational Policy Studies. She now attends graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in pursuit of a master's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders to become a speech-language pathologist.

Cassandra Duernberger will graduate Spring 2019 with a bachelor's degree in Personal Finance and concentration in Financial Planning.

Cassidy Hartzog will graduate Fall 2018 with a double major in Education Studies and Sociology and concentration in analysis and research. She is planning to travel after graduation and find full time work as a data analyst.

Kathryn Hendrickson Gagen graduated in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology. She is currently working and living in Madison while applying to Ph.D. programs in Sociocultural Anthropology.

Ryan Mulrooney will graduate in Spring 2019 with a bachelor's degree in English and Education & Educational Services. He plans to pursue a master's degree in Secondary Education-English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

David Singer graduated in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in Economics and a certificate in Business and Environmental Studies. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in the University of Wisconsin-Madison La Follette School of Public Affairs.

Isabella Vang will graduate in Spring 2019 with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology and Religious Studies.

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**Wisconsin Center for  
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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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**Center for Research on College to Workforce Transitions (CCWT)**

1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706

For more information contact Center Director Matthew T. Hora ([hora@wisc.edu](mailto:hora@wisc.edu))

[ccwt.wceruw.org](http://ccwt.wceruw.org)