



JEFF MILLER/ UW-MADISON

The UW's 'sifting and winnowing' is hardly fearless

By *Richard Esenberg*

Richard T. Ely taught economics at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1800s. Ely is strongly associated with the university's role in the Progressive Movement and the development of what is called the Wisconsin Idea — the now commonplace belief that the university should try to improve people's lives outside the classroom.

In 1894, there was an attempt to remove Ely as chair

of the economics department for teaching "socialistic" doctrines. In rejecting the charges, the Board of Regents passionately defended academic freedom, observing, "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."

This ringing passage has been repeatedly invoked,

Lacking intellectual diversity, the university is increasingly intolerant of libertarian and conservative thinking.

most recently in opposition to proposed cuts in the university's budget and a stillborn effort to amend its mission statement to focus more specifically on work force and economic development. We are, the university says, about an untrammelled and open search for knowledge. Indeed, the "sifting and winnowing" passage can be found on a plaque outside Bascom Hall.

But the search for truth is not particularly robust inside the building. If it were, the UW might enjoy more political support than it does today. But it, like many universities, has allowed itself to become ideologically homogenous and increasingly intolerant of views thought to be inconsistent with the shibboleths of modern progressivism. At UW-Madison — and many universities — there are many orthodoxies that apparently no longer need to be sifted and winnowed.

We read about the easily ridiculed political

correctness and intolerance rooted in highly politicized — and increasingly odder — grievances. The UW is not immune from that, but the larger problem is its lack of a commitment to intellectual diversity. An enormous percentage of professors share the same presuppositions. They may not believe that knowledge has reached its final goal, but they are awfully secure in their parochial worldview.

The UW is riddled with academic centers and programs — for example, the Havens Center for Social Justice and the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (both in Madison) and the Center for Economic Development (at the Milwaukee campus) — that are essentially left-wing think tanks. The problem is not that their work is bad (although it sometimes is) or that research centers with a point of view are inappropriate at a public university (they are not). It is that the UW would never countenance research centers with a conservative or libertarian perspective.

Can you imagine the Wisconsin Policy Research

Institute housed in Vilas Hall? Of course, you can't.

This is a problem — the university's increasing homogeneity and conformity — that it can't even see. As a law

professor at another school once told me, the modern academic's idea of diversity is to hire people who went to the same schools, had the same jobs and think the same way, but look different. Thus academia becomes an insular and conformist place where like-minded faculties replicate themselves. When everyone assumes the same things, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to see what has been missed.

This is not just a problem for conservatives, but for the UW itself. When the university comes to be seen as the exclusive domain of an ideology, it can no longer expect support from those who do not share that ideology. If, in fact, Republicans have declared war on the university, it is because the university has declared war on Republicans.

"If, in fact, Republicans have declared war on the UW, it is because the UW has declared war on Republicans."

If this adverse reaction leads to lack of support for the Wisconsin Idea or for funding the university's self-proclaimed "search for truth," we should not be surprised. In fact, we should not even be disturbed. The problem is not, as with Richard Ely, that the university teaches doctrines disfavored by the public. It is that it won't tolerate challenges to its own parochial perspectives.

Academic freedom is now invoked, not to protect the iconoclast, but to exclude her. Chemists and physicists may suffer for the sins of sociologists and law professors. But if "sifting and winnowing" are not honestly followed and if the research that might benefit us all is circumscribed by ideological suppositions, the case for state funding becomes considerably weaker.

As we discuss its future, the UW is correct to remind us of the larger mission of a research university and the importance of academic freedom. But it needs to learn to walk the talk.

Richard Esenberg is president of the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty. He blogs at sharkandshepherd.blogspot.com.