

Erik Iverson: Innovation, jobs and the Wisconsin Idea

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From the moment I arrived in Wisconsin last year, I loved the familiar energy, intellect and passion for doing things well. I was happy to return to my Midwestern roots to become the managing director of the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF). For more than 90 years, WARF has funded researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to give rise to their amazing inventions, which WARF then patents and licenses to companies that turn those inventions into products. This work creates family-sustaining jobs in Wisconsin, grows the state's economy, and provides revenue for the university.

Yet I believe we can do more. To maximize the positive effect the University of Wisconsin can have, we must find better ways to tap into the collective intelligence and energy of all of the campuses in the UW System. We must work together in building a continual feedback loop with the people of our state so the Wisconsin system universities can better understand the challenges they face and identify sustainable and valuable solutions.

This sense of responsibility to connect with our communities is summed up by the Wisconsin Idea, or the long-standing vision that the university's positive influence should reach every family. And it is a value I share.

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That's why one of my highest priorities is to expand WARF's contribution to the Wisconsin Idea.

We have tremendous potential for innovation in Wisconsin. Recently, UW-Madison

engineering professor Daniel Ludois was honored by the Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation as one of five inventors in the United States working on ideas that will change the world. WARF is proud to have invested in his cutting-edge research on electric motors. Dan's story is one of many that involves university researchers on our UW System campuses turning the seeds of their ideas into groundbreaking discoveries that positively impact people around the world. It's a Wisconsin tradition and WARF is deeply proud to participate in it. As WARF continues to serve UW-Madison, we will work more closely with the other campuses to identify research and inventions that are complementary to one another. All of us who think about turning great ideas into marketable products should routinely compare notes so we can coordinate our efforts, whether it be in manufacturing, health care, information technology, agriculture or any other segment of our economy.

When we work with university researchers to turn their innovations into products, we are always thinking about who can help them grow their young companies. We know we can find the talent, resources and expertise in our communities. That's why we're committed to building capital to co-fund startups. One of WARF's strategic priorities is to connect promising university technologies with new or mature companies that are led by savvy teams. All elements of that construct are necessary for success — intelligent enterprises with entrepreneurial horsepower and the interest in partnering with us on advancing university technologies to the market.

We also need to get better at tapping into the executives, workforce and capital that exists all over Wisconsin. By bringing the state's resources together in a coordinated way, we can maximize their collective potential. There could be a talented entrepreneur in Eau Claire, Green Bay or Wausau, for example, eager to take a shot at manufacturing a new invention developed at the university, with an entire workforce waiting for the next opportunity.

But WARF cannot and should not make this happen on our own. In the coming months, we will redouble our efforts at outreach in partnership with the WiSys Technology Foundation, which performs a role similar to ours for most of the rest of the public universities in Wisconsin. We also hope to work with UW-Milwaukee, Marquette University and the Medical College of Wisconsin. Working together, we will create a forum that fosters this collaborative approach, involving school, business and political leaders, and people who have capital to invest.

To begin this dialogue, I am inviting leaders from throughout the state to contribute

their perspectives on the role of innovation and the Wisconsin Idea, and will publicly share our collective recommendations over the next several months. You will hear from co-authors representing different regions and spheres of influence from across Wisconsin discussing their thoughts on the importance collaborative solution-building has if performed in partnership by our university researchers, industry leaders, policymakers and other community colleagues. WARF is proud to sponsor this series of articles and we hope to hear from readers as well. Join the dialogue by contributing your thoughts at wisconsinidea@warf.org.

We know that by working together we can find the best, most efficient ways to solve the state's challenges, create private sector jobs and private sector profits, and keep that revenue in Wisconsin to invest in our people and our economy.

Let's draw on the strength and power of the Wisconsin Idea to make that happen.

— Erik Iverson is the managing director of the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF). This commentary is part of a series of articles organized by WARF. For over 90 years WARF has promoted a cycle of innovation through advancement of University research discoveries to the market and reinvestment in research at UW-Madison.