

UW-Madison: Charles Lee Isbell Jr. named UW-Madison provost

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The University of Wisconsin–Madison’s next provost, Charles Lee Isbell Jr., has a deep and distinguished background that blends institutional leadership in computer science, research into machine learning and artificial intelligence, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

“I am tremendously excited to welcome Dr. Isbell to my leadership team and our community,” says Chancellor Jennifer L. Mnookin. “In addition to his exceptional credentials as a scholar, he is an experienced and effective administrator, a skilled collaborator and an advocate for access to STEM and higher education.”

“I am confident that his leadership as our next provost will help advance UW–Madison’s teaching, scholarship and outreach mission in the years to come,” she adds.

The provost is the university’s chief academic officer and second-ranking leader under the chancellor. Isbell will begin in his new role on August 1, succeeding Karl Scholz, who is departing to assume the presidency of the University of Oregon. Letters & Science Dean Eric Wilcots is serving as interim provost.

“Throughout my academic career I have been focused on research and educational reform,” says Isbell, who describes himself as a computationalist. “I am a strong believer that higher education must play a vital role in creating opportunities for deep engagement in what it means to be an active and productive member of society.

“I’m excited to be joining UW–Madison, a place I’ve long admired for its dynamic and world-leading teaching, learning and research, and I look forward to becoming a

part of the Madison community.”

Isbell comes to UW–Madison from the Georgia Institute of Technology, where he has been the John P. Imlay Jr. Dean of the College of Computing since 2019. The college has nearly 20,000 students and its undergraduate and graduate computer science programs recently ranked 5th and 8th, respectively.

Under his leadership, the college has been widely viewed as one of the most innovative computing programs in the country. Known as a collaborative leader, Isbell has also held prior leadership roles at Georgia Tech, including serving as executive associate dean for two years before his deanship.

Originally from Chattanooga, Tenn., Isbell received a Bachelor of Science degree from Georgia Tech and a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he studied at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory.

Following his education, he joined AT&T Labs/Research before returning to Georgia Tech in 2002 to join the faculty of the College of Computing. The unifying theme of his research is machine learning and artificial intelligence, particularly using technology to build systems to foster lifelong learning.

Isbell is internationally recognized in his field. In 2021, he was elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has won two “best paper” awards for technical contributions in artificial intelligence and machine learning, was named a National Academy of Sciences Kavli Fellow in addition to NSF Faculty Early Career Development Program and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency awards for young investigators. He is a fellow of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) as well as the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AAAI).

He was awarded the 2023 Computing Research Association A. Nico Habermann Award, in recognition of his substantial impact on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in the computing community.

“Isbell’s reputation as a scholar, his skills in administration, and his strategic approaches to expanding public education to new communities of learners complement and augment UW’s existing expertise and will help to ensure that our longstanding tradition of the Wisconsin Idea will continue to be a guiding beacon of the future of public higher education in our state,” says Robert J. Hamers, the

Steenbock Professor of Physical Science in the Department of Chemistry and chair of the search committee.

He notes that Isbell's visibility in the field will help to advance UW's recent commitments to UW's new School of Computer, Data and Information Sciences.

Isbell says he sees the provost's role as that of a convener, with a major focus on enabling the right relationships between the people and organizations within and outside the university to achieve the community's goals.

"Building such relationships involves those in the university but also the alumni; the local and state government; and the many who will never be directly involved with the university itself," he says. "The successful provost must be able to work with the chancellor, the faculty, the staff and the students to tell the university's story — not just his or her own — both internally and externally, and that is done through listening as well as talking."

Outside of work, Isbell's interests include a deep passion for music, sci-fi, comics and popular culture. Isbell and his wife, Sheila, have two children, Joni and Cody.

Isbell was chosen following a [nationwide search](#). Hamers expressed appreciation for the 16-member search committee, which screened the pool of applicants and recommended four finalists to Mnookin.

"UW-Madison's reputation ensured that we would have wide interest in our role, which resulted in an exceptional group of finalists," Hamers says. "From them, I am absolutely delighted by the appointment of Dr. Isbell."

The provost oversees and works closely with the deans and the vice provosts and collaborates with campus leadership and shared governance to strengthen and support UW-Madison's academic mission of teaching and research, as well as public service.

The provost's responsibilities include overseeing 13 schools and colleges as well as a number of key areas such as enrollment management, teaching and learning, outreach, the Division of Extension, Wisconsin Public Media, libraries and international affairs, among others.