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Why Revenue Generation Can't Solve the Crisis in Higher Education, Or, What's That Smell?

Nan Enstad

Abstract

The emergence in the early 2000s of now-familiar cheerleading rhetoric about entrepreneurial innovation, income-generating projects, and public-private partnerships thinly masked an imperative for public university administrators to play a high-stakes game of seeking private funding to replace declining state support. The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened this preexisting financial crisis. This article examines the effects of seeking corporate partnerships as a solution to universities' financial problems via a scandal at University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, in the 2010s. The university's foundation illegally invested taxpayer dollars in several private companies, including financing a manure biodigester for a controversial dairy factory farm. Before their illegality was exposed, these investments conferred great prestige on university administrators as successful twenty-first-century administrator-entrepreneurs. The story reveals the untenable financial situation of public universities forced to become obsequious partners to corporations, the inadequacy of neoliberal solutions to the crisis in higher education, and the need for federal reinvestment.

Entrepreneurial innovation! Income-generating projects! Public-private partnerships! The emergence of this now-familiar cheerleading rhetoric in the early 2000s thinly masked an imperative for public university administrators to play a high-stakes game of seeking private funding to replace declining state support. It is now taken for granted that high-level university administrators eye regional, national, and international

businesses with an eager and obsequious hunger, while universities looking to hire at the top levels of administration seek economists and CEOs rather than literature or political science professors. The threat is real: states are drastically cutting or even closing public colleges and universities around the country.¹ The academic mantra is no longer “publish or perish” but “build or be buried.”

The reorientation of the university around new fiscal imperatives undermines autonomy and shifts leadership priorities to extractive ideals of growth. Almost invariably, this shift affects the university’s research agenda as well as the political climate in which research questions are articulated and posed. At its worst, rather than private industry supporting the university, the university becomes another state resource that big business may strip-mine for profit and prestige. In trying to save the public university through playing the neoliberal game, the value of the enterprise—both fiscally and socially—may be squandered.

Nowhere is this danger more clearly demonstrated than in the financial scandal at University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, the largest regional comprehensive university in the University of Wisconsin system. In January 2020, UWO chancellor Richard Wells and former vice chancellor of administrative services and chief business officer Thomas Sonnleitner each pleaded guilty to one felony (plea bargained down from five) for illegally directing \$11 million in public funds from the UWO budget to pay loans on investments in five building projects undertaken by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Foundation from 2010 to 2014.

Two of those investments involved off-campus private businesses that were intended to generate revenue for the university: a manure biodigester for the state’s largest dairy factory farm and a major renovation for a downtown Oshkosh hotel. The dairy factory farm’s manure digester had the greatest potential to generate revenue and also became the biggest fiasco of the five projects. The digester cost \$1 million more than expected and fell short of generating the expected revenues.

Before the illegality of the transactions became public, Wells and Sonnleitner seemed to have achieved the ideal: their business partnerships resulted in new buildings and a distinctive nationally recognized campus identity around green energy and sustainability. Once exposed, the debacle left the UW system—and ultimately taxpayers—holding the bill. Wells and Sonnleitner each paid \$70,000 in damages, but the UW system was left owing roughly \$6.8 million to the banks.²

¹ See Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), for a trenchant analysis of the effects of privatization and making universities act like businesses.

² Criminal Complaint, State of Wisconsin v. Richard H. Wells and Thomas G. Sonnleitner, Winnebago County Circuit Court, 4-26-2018, 2018CR000316; Civil Complaint, The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Thomas G. Sonnleitner and Richard H. Wells, Dane County Circuit Court, 1-18-2017, 2017CV000106. Devi Shastri, “Federal Funds Will Cover Bank Loans, Building Purchases, in UW Oshkosh Foundation Settlement,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2019/01/25/uw-oshkosh->

The investments, exposure of illegality, and the fallout all took place during a decade when the UW system and UWO in particular were under siege. Wells and Sonnleitner launched the first of the five projects in 2010, the same year Scott Walker ran for and won the governor's office in a wave of midterm Republican victories across the country. Walker's slogan was "Wisconsin is open for business," and his policies directed state wealth toward big business through tax breaks, tax credits, and special legislation while siphoning money from public education. In addition to obliterating state employee unions, Walker's budgets cut hundreds of millions of dollars from the UW system over his eight-year term. The Brookings Institution recently reported that Wisconsin state support for regional comprehensive universities declined by more than 42 percent from 2006 to 2018, making Wisconsin dead last among Great Lakes states in this category.³ UWO has faced particularly harsh budget shortfalls, especially since the implementation of a 2015 tuition freeze, and has responded by offering early retirement to faculty; eliminating staff, faculty, and virtually all adjunct positions; increasing teaching loads; offering fewer courses; and limiting faculty conference travel.⁴

Three strands came together to create the conditions for the UWO scandal: (1) plummeting public support for higher education leading to the rising importance of university foundations; (2) a euphoric and unrestrained climate for big business in the Walker era; and (3) the growth of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in Wisconsin and their associated pollution. Dairy cows and Scott Walker's gubernatorial policies make this a distinctively Wisconsin story, but the scandal reveals deeper trends in extractive capitalism and higher education that are national in scope.

Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown virtually all US public higher educational institutions into crisis, we stand at a crossroads. The giddy rhetoric of entrepreneurial innovation obscures the deep risks and significant math problems for solving the higher education crisis by forcing universities, through their

foundation-uw-system-use-federal-funds-pay-banks/2679440002/; Devi Shastri, Nathaniel Shuda, and Lydia Slattery, "UW-Oshkosh Foundation: Former Administrators Sentenced in Felony Case." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2020/01/15/uw-oshkosh-foundation-former-administrators-sentenced-felony-case/4469726002/>. A judge dismissed the civil suit on June 25, 2020, five months after the criminal complaint was settled. "Judge Dismisses Civil Suit against Former UW Oshkosh Officials," *Oshkosh Examiner*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.oshkoshexaminer.com/2020/06/judge-dismisses-civil-suit-against-former-uw-oshkosh-officials-5-months-after-criminal-case-wrapped-up.html>.

³ Rich Kremer, "Report: Wisconsin Spends Less on Regional Public Universities per Student Than All Other Great Lakes States." Wisconsin Public Radio, June 22, 2020, <https://www.wpr.org/report-wisconsin-spends-less-regional-public-universities-student-all-other-great-lakes-states>.

⁴ Kelly Meyerhofer, "UW-Oshkosh Faculty Workloads Will Increase Next Year in New Cost-Cutting Plan," *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 20, 2018, https://madison.com/news/local/education/university/uw-oshkosh-faculty-workloads-will-increase-next-year-in-new-cost-cutting-plan/article_aca70dab-5b63-5533-a6af-c0b939c8e4f8.html.

foundations, to become the dependent and obsequious partner in corporate deals. The UWO scandal shows just how much can go wrong, even with good intentions, when following the neoliberal model.

In Wisconsin, this neoliberal vision has deeply threatened another with a long history: the Wisconsin Idea, the ideal that the beneficent impact of the University of Wisconsin would reach the furthest corners of the state's population. According to this vision, the regional comprehensive universities (and the two-year colleges) are a mechanism for public investment in a healthy and diversified state economy. State educational resources should not go only to supporting an elite urban flagship or serving the needs of large corporations but should be spread more broadly to serve the diverse peoples and businesses of Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Idea supported utilizing university research to solve the states' industrial and agricultural problems, but the point was not to funnel university resources to private profit. Indeed, the progressive architects of the Wisconsin Idea were motivated to fully articulate a vision of public good in large part by their suspicion of the power of corporate "trusts." The Wisconsin Idea, according to sociologist Chad Goldberg, directed the university's service to state government, the public, and democracy—not to "private capital."⁵ Comprehensive institutions like UWO fulfill this mission in many ways: they enable class mobility, prevent brain drain, and serve underrepresented minorities at higher rates than state flagships. They are economic engines in their own right, employing large numbers of people and generating businesses and social services in their locales. When adequately supported, they also enable research relations that support local economic development. Federal and state investment in regional comprehensives, not neoliberal speculation, offers a means of fostering states' recovery from the economic devastation of COVID-19.

Be Entrepreneurial!

In 2010, as Chancellor Wells and Vice Chancellor Sonnleitner steered UWO into the future, they heard the clarion call to be entrepreneurial. In order to accomplish their goals they necessarily turned to the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Foundation (hereafter, the Foundation). University foundations are nonprofit, charitable corporations that exist to raise money for their universities. As legal entities, they are entirely separate from their universities, and as such they can do things that universities cannot, such as invest money in a private business. As state funding has receded, the role of university foundations in the structure of higher education has expanded from fundraising, money management, and building projects to

⁵ Goldberg explicitly critiques Governor Tommy Thompson's 1996 attempt to define a "New Wisconsin Idea." Goldberg argues that Thompson flipped the original intention from serving the public good to serving private industry owners. See Goldberg, "The University's Service to Democracy," in Chad Goldberg, ed., *Education for Democracy: Renewing the Wisconsin Idea* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 3-52, quote p. 12.

entrepreneurship in revenue-generating projects.⁶ UWO, like branch campuses in all large state systems, competed for UW system dollars that were spread thinly—and unevenly—across the system’s many schools. A strong and successful foundation not only may build campus infrastructure and retain personnel, it may generate revenue to help a regional school expand and build a distinctive profile. In turn, such a profile may make a school more competitive for system funds or less vulnerable to cuts and restructuring.

Between 2010 and 2014, the Foundation made bold investments in building and business projects, including the off-campus, revenue-generating Oshkosh Best Western Waterfront Hotel (in which it held a one-third stake) and the Rosendale Dairy manure digester (which it funded in full). The three other projects also had some income-generating potential but were located on or adjacent to the university campus: the new, high-profile Alumni Welcome and Conference Center, the expanded and updated Oshkosh Sports Complex, and an additional campus biodigester that would process yard waste and table scraps. To accomplish these goals, the Foundation started four limited liability corporations, partnered with a range of different private companies, and took out significant loans.⁷

The Foundation and UWO also established a new relationship between the two entities that made UWO responsible for Foundation debts on the projects. Sonnleitner and Wells codified this relationship in two kinds of documents. First, they produced a “Memorandum of Understanding” that spelled out this relationship in order to assuage the concerns of the Foundation’s board of directors. Like most university foundations, the Foundation’s board of directors was a volunteer body of local and state business leaders and some alumni, all of whom had a stake in the success of the university. A few members had objected to the scope of these projects because they would leave the Foundation exposed to considerable risk in the event of unforeseen costs or poor revenues. The memorandum assured them that the much larger UWO assumed the risk. Second, Sonnleitner and Wells also provided loan guarantees to banks that turned that relationship into specific promises.⁸

⁶ Martha T. McCluskey, “Following the Money in Public Higher Education Foundations: Academic Austerity in the Midst of Academic Wealth,” *Academe*, January–February 2017, <https://www.aaup.org/article/following-money-public-higher-education-foundations>.

⁷ Criminal Complaint, State of Wisconsin v. Richard H. Wells and Thomas G. Sonnleitner; Civil Complaint, The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Thomas G. Sonnleitner and Richard H. Wells.

⁸ Criminal Complaint, State of Wisconsin v. Richard H. Wells and Thomas G. Sonnleitner; Civil Complaint, The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Thomas G. Sonnleitner and Richard H. Wells; Noell Dickmann and Nate Beck, “UWO Lawsuit Documents \$11M in Illegal Transfers,” *Oshkosh Northwestern*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.thenorthwestern.com/story/news/education/2017/01/18/lawsuit-alleges-uwo-officials-mishandled-money/96697874/>.

The problem was that these guarantees and the payments they led to were illegal. The Wisconsin state constitution and UW system policies forbid a public entity from funding a private organization.⁹ Funds are meant to flow in one direction only: from charitable foundation to university. By setting up a system whereby the university would guarantee the Foundation's loans, the UWO created the possibility that public money—taxpayer money—would flow to the Foundation and into its private investments. And that's exactly what happened, in over \$11 million in illegal financial transfers.

In April 2016, UWO's new chancellor, Andrew Leavitt, informed UW system officials of irregularities in UWO's relationship to the Foundation's investments. Leavitt had replaced Wells after his retirement in 2014. According to Leavitt's explanation, Foundation president Art Rathjen approached Leavitt for assistance in making a payment on the Welcome Center and informed him of the arrangement established by Wells and Sonnleitner. This raised warning bells for Leavitt who, incidentally, had been CEO of the University of North Georgia Inc. Foundation before he became chancellor at UWO.¹⁰

After a process of inquiry, Wells and Sonnleitner faced two sets of charges: the UW system brought a civil suit against them in Dane County for illegally converting UW system funds to Foundation property; and the Wisconsin state attorney initiated criminal proceedings against them in Winnebago County for misconduct in public office by acts in excess of lawful authority (a class 1 felony). Wells had already moved to Florida (after the Foundation bought his Oshkosh home for approximately \$120,000 over market value to use as a chancellor's residence). Sonnleitner, however, had continued as chief business officer and vice chancellor. Leavitt suspended him in May 2016 and Sonnleitner retired shortly after, but first he authorized a transfer of almost \$200,000 from UWO to the Foundation not tied to a specific project. Rathjen, who had served as vice chancellor for university advancement and UW-Oshkosh Foundation president, was terminated in January 2017. Chancellor Leavitt issued a public statement declaring that Wells and Sonnleitner "broke a sacred trust" and promised that he instead would cultivate "an environment in which ethical leadership thrives."¹¹

⁹ Specifically, the acts violated the Wisconsin Constitution, Article VIII, §3 and Article VIII §7 (2) (d), Wis. Stat. §895.446 and Wis. Stat. §943.20 (1) (a) and (b). See Civil Complaint, *The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Thomas G. Sonnleitner and Richard H. Wells*.

¹⁰ Andrew Leavitt, "Important University Update," *UW Oshkosh Today* (blog), January 18, 2017, <https://uwosh.edu/today/48329/important-university-update/>.

¹¹ Karen Herzog, "UW-Oshkosh Foundation Paid Top Dollar for Chancellor's Fixer Upper—and Then Paid More." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2017/04/01/uw-oshkosh-foundation-paid-top-dollar-chancellors-fixer-upper-and-then-paid-more/99804540/>; Civil Complaint, *The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Thomas G. Sonnleitner and Richard H. Wells*; Andrew Leavitt, "Important University Update," *UW Oshkosh Today* (blog), January 18, 2017, <https://uwosh.edu/today/48329/important-university-update/>.

These were stinging words for Sonnleitner and Wells who, by all accounts, had genuinely wanted to see UWO thrive despite the crushing loss of state funding and the promise of more cuts with Walker in the governor's office. Schools like UWO lack the wealthy alumni, huge grant streams, or patent royalties that help cushion the flagship, UW Madison, and they have fewer out-of-state and international students. With tuition among the lowest in the region, Wells and Sonnleitner had few options to fund university programs.

Lawyers for Sonnleitner and Wells repeatedly emphasized in court and in the press that the men did not personally benefit from the loans. But that's not exactly correct. Neither man was directly lining his pockets through the transfers (though there is the questionable purchase price for the chancellor's house). However, as buildings went up and projects gained publicity, Wells and Sonnleitner won praise for a flourishing at UWO. Over the course of Wells's fourteen-year leadership, UWO enrollments rose significantly, including among students of color, and the number of majors increased. UWO won national awards as a "green campus" in part because of two of the projects, the campus table-waste digester and the dairy farm manure digester. When he retired in 2014, Wells was celebrated for revitalizing UWO and fostering the economic development of the city of Oshkosh, the region, and the state: the gold standard for the twenty-first-century public university entrepreneur-administrator.¹² Only after his retirement did it become clear that Wells was not an alchemist and that behind the regional university's financial magic was a complex and illegal shell game.

Generate Revenue!

The role of the Foundation in these investments was both essential and nearly undetectable. As University of Buffalo Law School professor Martha T. McCluskey argues, the private status of foundations means that their investments and decision-making processes lie outside of the faculty governance channels that are designed to protect academic integrity and safeguard the campus mission. As private entities, foundations do not have to make their transactions public unless specific state law requires them to do so.¹³ The problem of the UWO debacle thus exceeds its illegality. The need to seek revenue-generating projects created new priorities and processes that significantly affected the research and teaching mission of UWO. The troubling implications of

¹² Karen Herzog, "Embattled Ex-Chancellor of UW-Oshkosh: He Did Nothing for Own Gain," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2017/04/06/embattled-former-chancellor-nothing-he-did-frolic-his-own/100100194/>; Karen Herzog, "UW-Oshkosh Scandal Couldn't Come at Worse Time," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2017/01/19/former-uw-oshkosh-leader-once-visionary-now-accused-illegal-dealings/96714454/>.

¹³ McCluskey, "Following the Money in Public Higher Education Foundations."

foundations' new income-generating role become especially clear in the case of the Foundation's investment in the Rosendale manure digester.

The manure biodigester deal between UWO, the Foundation, and Rosendale Dairy was an excellent one for Rosendale Dairy. The Foundation was the sole investor, though the biodigester was installed on Rosendale Dairy property for the corporation's sole use. The Foundation's newly founded corporation partnered with the German biodigester manufacturer, the Viessmann Group, and its US partner, BIOFerm USA Inc. of Madison, Wisconsin, to design and build the digester. Foundations traditionally invest in buildings on campus as a gift to their university; three of the other illegally backstopped investments fit this category. In this case, the investment was a gift to Milk Source Corporation, with the Foundation anticipating revenues from the "green" energy sold to Alliant Energy.

Milk Source Corporation, founded in 1999 in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, owns Rosendale Dairy along with other large dairy CAFOs in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Missouri, as well as several related companies focused on genetics, calf, and heifer raising. In aggregate, Milk Source milks many tens of thousands of cows at multiple CAFOs and prides itself on technological innovation.¹⁴ Rosendale is the largest dairy CAFO in the state of Wisconsin, milking approximately 8,000 cows when the digester was built.

Administrators augmented the income-generating plan with academic components. The Foundation announced its plan to establish a student learning and research center on the corporation's property, though this center was never built. Astonishingly, on October 13, 2014, Sonnleitner signed a lease agreement that UWO would pay \$700,000 per year to use Rosendale property, another illegal diversion of public money to a private firm. Also in 2014, the biodigester manufacturer, the Viessmann Group, endowed a chair in sustainable technology at UWO, and the school set up student internships at Viessmann Group in Germany.¹⁵

The Rosendale biodigester deal is a classic example of how, as McCluskey puts it, "the academic side of the university supports extensive foundation business operations" rather than a foundation serving the academic mission of its university, as it was established to do.¹⁶ UWO not only directed taxpayer money to a

¹⁴ Jim Dickrell, "The Milk Source Way," *AgWeb Farm Journal*, January 8, 2014, https://www.agweb.com/article/the_milk_source_way_NAA_Jim_Dickrell; Milk Source website, <https://www.milksource.com/about-us/>, accessed April 3, 2020.

¹⁵ Civil Complaint, *The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Thomas G. Sonnleitner and Richard H. Wells*; "UWO Professor Named First-Ever Viessmann Endowed Chair in Sustainable Technology," *UW Oshkosh Today* (blog), June 10, 2014, <https://uwosh.edu/today/34080/uwo-professor-named-first-ever-viessmann-endowed-chair-in-sustainable-technology/>.

¹⁶ McCluskey, "Following the Money in Public Higher Education Foundations."

large, multistate corporation but it also significantly repurposed its own research and public profile in the process.

The biodigester did not generate income as anticipated in part because the prices Alliant Energy paid for biogas dropped. The prices electric companies pay to entities producing renewable energy for the grid are vulnerable to policy changes reflected in federal and state laws. In 2006, the legislature passed a bill requiring utilities to obtain 10 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2015, a move that spurred green energy development. In Wisconsin, though, prices paid for biogas fell by two-thirds over the decade 2006 to 2016. In 2011, Governor Scott Walker allowed state utilities to buy green energy from Canada. The drop in natural gas prices due to fracking and competition from wind power also made biodigesters less lucrative.¹⁷

The illegal guarantees left the university responsible for shortfalls. The June 2012 “Memorandum of Understanding” stated that “the University will cover any deficit that is incurred” for the biodigester, including funding “any sunk costs” if the project were not completed. A December 27, 2012, loan guarantee to Wells Fargo Bank similarly promised that “if the revenues from operation of the Facility are insufficient to service the operational budget and debt service on [the loans] . . . the University will support the operations of the Facility, the payment of debt service on the Bonds and any other liability owed by the Borrower to the Purchaser.” According to the criminal complaint, Sonnleitner further promised that “UWO would hold \$10,000,000 of state funds as unrestricted assets to guarantee the loan” and that “any breach by UWO of its obligations in the guarantee would be an ‘event of default’” allowing the bank to sue UWO. The men made additional loan guarantees for the digester project to Wells Fargo and First Business Bank in 2014 and 2015, all illegal. As promised, Sonnleitner and Wells repeatedly transferred millions of dollars from the university to the Foundation to cover loan payments. What is more, Sonnleitner failed to properly record the transfers in UWO and Foundation books.¹⁸

The Rosendale Dairy manure biodigester became the biggest boondoggle of the five projects. The lowered prices for “green energy” meant that Sonnleitner hoofed it over to Wells’s office for biodigester loan payments more than for any other of the illegally backed projects. Eight transfers over three and a half years siphoned \$4.15 million from UWO for the biodigester loan payments, with the remaining \$7 million going to payments for the other four projects put together. In December 2012, Sonnleitner also agreed to allow BIOFerm to charge an additional \$1 million for the facility’s operations so that BIOFerm would approximate

¹⁷ Lee Bergquist, “Private Green Energy Deal Did Not Mean Gold for UW-Oshkosh,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2017/03/04/private-green-energy-deal-did-not-mean-gold-uw-oshkosh/98612032/>; Thomas Content, “Walker Signs Manitoba Hydro, Trucking Bills,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 5, 2011, <http://archive.jsonline.com/blogs/business/125036559.html>.

¹⁸ Criminal Complaint, State of Wisconsin v. Richard H. Wells and Thomas G. Sonnleitner.

a 15 percent profit on the project; a \$322,000 payment from UWO was the first installment on that additional debt.¹⁹

Form Public-Private Partnerships!

The numbers indicate the high stakes of this deal, but to understand the deeper motivations for the public-private partnership we have to consider what UWO and Milk Source hoped to gain from the association besides revenues. Intangibles like the buzz carried by “innovation” and “green energy” built prestige and conferred value in a public controversy about the environmental and social impact of factory farms and in the struggle among regional comprehensive universities to compete for scarce state dollars under a state government hostile to public education. Both the CAFO and UWO, in other words, sought their partnership in part for sources of prestige that would improve their position in ongoing but separate struggles. Both hyped the deal in very public ways, producing and amplifying its socioeconomic impact.

For UWO, the CAFO manure digester fit into its larger plan to create a sustainable “green campus” as UWO’s distinctive niche. President Arthur H. Rathjen cooed about the Rosendale digester: “This is a multifaceted win for our students and the state of Wisconsin, and it is the kind of innovative, entrepreneurial project the UW Oshkosh Foundation believes is essential to the future of our thriving institution.”²⁰ The enthusiasm was not just hot air. Administrators linked the CAFO manure digester to the campus digester that ran on yard waste and table scraps. The campus biodigester was adjacent to campus, had the support of faculty, and had educational and mission-related value. The nearby Allen farm, nominally a CAFO but housing a few hundred cows rather than many thousand, received a third, smaller digester from the deal. A Campus Sustainability Council composed of faculty and staff actively shaped the green campus mission, which included a 2009 Climate Action Plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2025.²¹

These efforts paid off when UWO gained a national reputation as a green campus. In 2015, UWO won the number three ranking in the Sierra Club’s “Coolest Schools” list of sustainable campuses. UWO was the only UW system school on the list and outperformed other more prestigious schools in the top ten including the University of Washington, Seattle, and Oberlin College. Likewise, the Princeton Review gave UWO its highest score on its “Green College Honor Roll,” along with just twenty-five other schools nationwide. No other UW schools are on the list. The partnership with the Viessmann Group on the biodigesters was part of

¹⁹ Criminal Complaint, State of Wisconsin v. Richard H. Wells and Thomas G. Sonnleitner.

²⁰ Quoted in “UWO Partners in Second Dynamic Biodigester Project,” *UW Oshkosh Today*, August 29, 2011, <https://uwosh.edu/today/13812/uwo-partners-in-second-dynamic-biodigester-project/>.

²¹ “UWO to Unveil Nation’s First Dry Fermentation Anaerobic Biodigester,” *UW Oshkosh Today*, May 12, 2011, <https://uwosh.edu/today/12004/uwo-to-unveil-nations-first-dry-fermentation-anaerobic-biodigester/>.

both award calculations.²² Wells and Sonnleitner succeeded in giving UWO a distinctive identity in the UW system and a national reputation attractive to many prospective students.

The biodigester projects also promised to make the Foundation an innovator and economic player in its own right. The campus biodigester was the first of its kind “in the Americas,” an often-noted fact in university public relations. “What no university in the Americas has is this,” said Gregg Underheim, who spoke on behalf of Congressman Tom Petri at the digester dedication.²³ In aggregate, the biodigesters built business ties and prestige. The trade journal *Manure Manager* explained that UWO hoped to “become known as a global leader in biodigester technology within the agricultural world.” As Sonnleitner put it, “We would like people in the biodigester field or in the agricultural world, if you mention the word Oshkosh, to say, ‘Oh yeah, I know about their systems.’ That’s what I’d like to see. If we can create this niche for Wisconsin, and not just for Oshkosh, then we’ve won.”²⁴ For UWO, the biodigesters gave the campus a green reputation, established a technological and economic niche, and built valuable political and business relationships.

From Milk Source’s perspective, it made sense to partner with UWO on a manure digester because, to put it plainly, Rosendale stunk. In an interview with the trade journal *Manure Manager*, Sonnleitner explained that Milk Source approached UWO “to help it address the odor complaints it was receiving from some of its Rosendale Dairy neighbors.”²⁵ Eight thousand cows create an overwhelming amount of manure. Midwest Environmental Advocates estimates that Rosendale Dairy generates and stores over 90 million gallons of manure and wastewater annually, which is more biological waste than any municipality in Wisconsin except Milwaukee and Madison. Unlike municipalities, however, CAFOs are not required to treat their biological waste before storing it in open lagoons and spraying it over farm fields. Land-spreading of manure releases large amounts of toxic ammonia into the air, and with it a smell strong enough to threaten neighboring property values.²⁶

²² “Green College Honor Roll,” *Princeton Review*, <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/green-guide/green-honor-roll>, accessed July 3, 2020; Avital Andrews, “America’s Greenest Universities: The Top 10,” Sierra Club, n.d. (2015), <https://www.sierraclub.org/top-ten-americas-greenest-universities>, accessed June 26, 2020; Mandy Potts, “UW-Oshkosh Ranked Near Top of America’s Greenest Colleges and Universities,” *UW Oshkosh Today*, August 11, 2015, <https://uwosh.edu/today/40777/uw-oshkosh-ranked-near-top-of-americas-greenest-colleges-and-universities/>.

²³ Quoted in Mandy Potts, “UWO, Partners Dedicate Innovative Biodigester,” *UW Oshkosh Today*, May 18, 2011, <https://uwosh.edu/today/12378/uwo-partners-dedicate-innovative-biodigester/>.

²⁴ Quoted in Tony Kryzanowski, “Rosendale Dairy: Home of New Digester,” *Manure Manager*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.manuremanager.com/rosendale-dairy-home-of-new-digester-16056/>.

²⁵ Sonnleitner, quoted in Kryzanowski, “Rosendale Dairy.”

²⁶ Midwest Environmental Advocates, “Rosendale Dairy,” <https://midwestadvocates.org/issues-actions/actions/rosendale-dairy>, accessed March 24, 2020; Will Cushman, “How to Smell a CAFO,” *WisCONTEXT* (blog), October 25, 2019, <https://www.wiscontext.org/how-smell-cafo>. Rosendale Dairy began with 4,000 cows and a plan to quickly expand to 8,000 cows. It currently milks approximately 9,000 cows.

Neighbors got involved and formed People Empowered Protect the Land (PEPL) of Rosendale in 2009 to challenge Rosendale's polluting practices and its planned expansion from 4,000 to 8,000 cows. The home of PEPL member Karen Krentz was surrounded by fields Rosendale sprayed heavily with slurry from the lagoons. "It doesn't really smell like manure," she said. "Manure I can handle. This smells like raw sewage." In addition to problems with air quality, factory farms may threaten water quality. If there is too much manure to spread safely on nearby farmland or the water table is too high, nitrates and bacteria in the manure may contaminate groundwater, or runoff may contaminate streams and lakes with phosphorus. Rosendale's location, an area where shallow soil and fractured rock made groundwater especially vulnerable to contamination, was particularly problematic. PEPL worked with an environmental law firm to challenge Milk Source's polluting practices and publicize the issue.²⁷

Particularly damaging for Milk Source was Rosendale's prominent position in a three-part investigative series titled "Who's Watching the Farm?," published in 2010 by the *Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison). The series focused on problems created by factory farms and drew statewide attention to an apparent David and Goliath battle between the polluting large corporation, made untouchable by a compromised Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and rigged regulatory system, and the average person, represented by PEPL, made to suffer the environmental and economic consequences. All the photographs in the series were of Rosendale Dairy.²⁸ Jim Ostrom, Milk Source partner and business manager, wrote a guest column published in the paper complaining about "unjustly slanted" reporting.²⁹

The manure digester helped Milk Source to flip its public reputation from polluter to green energy leader—without spending a dime to make this happen. The partnership with a University of Wisconsin

²⁷ Karen Krentz quoted in Ron Seeley, "Factory Farms Nothing Like Family Farms of Old," *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 1, 2010, https://madison.com/special-section/factory_farms/the_factory_next_door/factory-farms-nothing-like-family-farms-of-old/article_8eca3bd4-2315-11df-8a84-001cc4c002e0.html; Midwest Environmental Advocates, "Rosendale Dairy"; Scott Gordon, "What Manure Digesters Can and Can't Do," *WisCONTEXT* (blog), November 29, 2016, <https://www.wiscontext.org/what-manure-digesters-can-and-cant-do>.

²⁸Ron Seeley, "Tracking a Rising Tide of Waste," *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 28, 2010, https://madison.com/special-section/factory_farms/managing_manure/tracking-a-rising-tide-of-waste/article_df56a7f6-2255-11df-90a7-001cc4c03286.html; Ron Seeley, "In Deciding where Farms Go, Communities Find They May Have to Battle the State," *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 2, 2010, https://madison.com/special-section/factory_farms/the_factory_next_door/in-deciding-where-farms-go-communities-find-they-may-have/article_884cbae8-2257-11df-8486-001cc4c03286.html; Ron Seeley, "Factory Farms Nothing like Family Farms of Old," *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 1, 2010, https://madison.com/special-section/factory_farms/the_factory_next_door/factory-farms-nothing-like-family-farms-of-old/article_8eca3bd4-2315-11df-8a84-001cc4c002e0.html.

²⁹James J. Ostrom, "Articles on Big Dairies Misleading," guest column, *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 6, 2010, https://madison.com/news/opinion/column/guest/guest-column-articles-on-big-dairies-misleading/article_8f2d983e-2949-11df-8e9a-001cc4c03286.html.

school legitimated corporate activity as progressive and educational. As McCluskey put it, foundations can turn “a university’s reputation and resources into market commodities [to be] sold off” in financial ventures.³⁰ Even as its immediate neighbors complained that Milk Source polluted the environment and destroyed property value, the association with UWO allowed the corporation to bill itself as a good Wisconsin corporate citizen. “This is a special opportunity to bring a digester to our farm with an outstanding partner,” Ostrom wrote. “We are proud to be working with the visionaries of the UW Oshkosh Foundation and the University to not only create green energy but to be part of the science and technology education that will be taking place.” In public relations pieces announcing the deal, both UWO and Rosendale hyped a proposed rural community economic development center that would include classrooms and educational components on Rosendale’s property.³¹

Despite the fact that the public relations value of the partnership depended on academic components for both parties, UWO faculty and staff were not included in the decision-making process. A faculty and staff Campus Sustainability Council already existed that worked on UWO’s green energy program, and some faculty had established relationships with Rosendale from taking classes on field trips to the facility, which was only sixteen miles from campus. Nevertheless, as UWO sociologist Paul Van Auken recalled, “All of us found out about it in the newspaper, there was an article that announced the partnership. It came out of nowhere, with no faculty involvement. We were blindsided.” Van Auken said the faculty complained that they weren’t consulted. “What we got back was basically, ‘This is the Foundation, so you guys have nothing to say about it.’ We said, ‘That’s B.S. because the Foundation’s mission is to further the educational mission of the university.’”³²

Administrators appointed an ad hoc committee of faculty whose research related to dairy, biodigesters, alternate energy, and community development to give shape to the proposed center, now carrying a working title of the Center for University Rural Development and Sustainability (CURDS). Former UWO geology professor Maureen Muldoon recalled, “We were supposed to figure out what the regional center would be. Sonnleitner put me in charge of this committee but the charge was unclear. What are we doing?” Faculty were leery of Rosendale’s involvement and wanted control over what would be studied. The impact of CAFOs on rural communities? Groundwater testing and sampling? The role of undocumented immigrants? A UWO provost backed the faculty and assured them that UWO would not move forward if faculty were not in

³⁰ McCluskey, “Following the Money in Public Higher Education Foundations.”

³¹ Sonnleitner, quoted in “UWO Partners in Second Dynamic Biodigester Project.” *UW Oshkosh Today*, August 29, 2011, <https://uwosh.edu/today/13812/uwo-partners-in-second-dynamic-biodigester-project/>; Kryzanowski, “Rosendale Dairy.”

³² Paul Van Auken, telephone interview with author, June 25, 2020.

control of the center. One idea was that UWO faculty would offer consulting services in rural economic development and environmental sustainability at the center, but faculty worried that the location would compromise the program. Van Auken recalled, “I thought, there’s going to be a big problem selling consulting services to the community if it’s part of a partnership with a CAFO. It’s like doing a public health program funded by a tobacco company.” When revenues for green energy fell short, the timetable for the biodigester shifted, the committee suspended its work, and the center never materialized.³³

Faculty members’ skepticism came from Rosendale’s reputation as a polluter as well as from their previous experiences at the facility. Muldoon saw merit in partnering with a large dairy on a manure digester but wondered why Rosendale, a CAFO located in a setting particularly vulnerable to groundwater contamination. “I think [Rosendale] picked a digester project with us to improve their environmental image,” said Muldoon. During class field trips to the facility, faculty found Rosendale staff to be very cooperative and welcoming unless student questions struck a nerve. Van Auken found that the tour guide reacted defensively to questions about animal welfare and water quality, or sometimes to “straightforward questions that were simply about trying to understand the bigger picture rather than being happy with the ice cream and keychain.” Rosendale representatives also responded with anger to a project report by Van Auken’s undergraduates. “Some questions were not welcomed,” recalled Muldoon. A faculty member who chose not to be identified said, “In my experiences working with Milk Source, they were open to collaboration on their terms. I took a lot of students on field trips to the dairy. . . . And whenever I asked, they would set one up. But if any of our faculty spoke ill of the dairy or the company, they were essentially blackballed. Not welcomed back. . . . The point is they weren’t much interested in our version of academic inquiry.”³⁴

There is no doubt that partnering with UWO raised Milk Source’s prestige and provided a bulwark against further criticism of its environmental practices. Shortly after the launch of the digester, Milk Source won a number of industry-granted environmental awards, including the 2014 Innovative Dairy Farmers of the Year Award, given by the International Dairy Foods Association and *Dairy Today* magazine, and the

³³ Maureen Muldoon, telephone interview with author, June 26, 2020; Van Auken interview. In a UWO press release, Foundation administrators described a “public education center” and a “classroom and laboratory” and a “new center on rural community development” at the Rosendale site; Provost and Vice Chancellor Lane Earns referred to the “working title” of the center as the “Center for University Rural Development and Sustainability” (CURDS). “UWO Partners in Second Dynamic Biodigester Project,” *UW Oshkosh Today*, August 29, 2011; Lane Earns to Paul Van Auden and nine others, February 20, 2012, letter in author’s possession.

³⁴ Muldoon interview; Van Auken interview; anonymous UWO faculty member, telephone interview with author, June 22, 2020.

Wisconsin Manufactures and Commerce Association 2014 Business Friend of the Environment award. Milk Source lists those awards prominently on its website.³⁵

The Public University and the Struggle for Sustainable Economies

The scandal at UWO epitomizes the dangers faced by public universities that seek to fill financial gaps by sidling up to big corporate players. One last bit of context from Governor Scott Walker's neoliberal policies makes it clear that corporate players captured UWO's public money and prestige not only for a digester but also to promote and strengthen a regressive model of rural economic development in a time of pitched battle for the future of Wisconsin farming as well as public education. This aspect of the story demonstrates that the undermining of public education is inseparable from larger economic struggles at the state level. Fizzy buzzwords like *innovation*, *entrepreneurship*, and *public-private partnerships* can make it seem like there is only one viable economic model going into the future, but that is simply untrue. Revealing the struggle that is taking place is important to reclaiming a vision for a sustainable economy and a public higher education system that serves the people of the state.

The Foundation initiated the two off-campus projects—the hotel and manure digester—during Walker's first year in office. Elected in November 2010, Walker immediately made it clear that big business was “in” and public education was “out” by advancing budgets that attacked public employee unions, defunded public education, and redistributed taxpayer money to big business. According to the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, in fiscal year 2012–13, Walker's corporate tax cuts and credits cost the state at least \$334.5 million; that annual cost was scheduled to grow to \$438.9 million by 2020–21. At the same time, claiming that “Wisconsin is broke,” Walker's 2011 budget proposal included a \$250 million cut to the UW system.³⁶

While the UW system reeled, Milk Source cleaned up—and it even got some help with its odor problem. The corporation benefited from the wide range of corporate tax cuts and tax credits that drained state coffers. In addition, the state assembly passed Act 122, which hamstrung the state DNR by declaring that it “may not regulate the emission of hazardous air contaminants associated with agricultural waste except to the extent

³⁵ Milk Source, “About Us,” accessed April 3, 2020, <http://www.milksource.com/about-us/>; Dickrell, “The Milk Source Way.”

³⁶ Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, “Special Interest Smorgasbord: Report on the Favors for Special Interests Approved by the Legislature and the Governor in 2011 and 2012,” May 21, 2012, <https://www.wisdc.org/news/13-special-reports/4056-special-interest-smorgasbord>; Deborah Ziff, “University of Wisconsin System Faces \$250 Million Cut, Restructuring,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 2, 2011, https://madison.com/news/local/education/university/university-of-wisconsin-system-faces-250-million-cut-restructuring/article_c3489fee-4449-11e0-921b-001cc4c03286.html.

required by federal law.”³⁷ The knowledge capital of the university could be captured by corporations like Milk Source, but agricultural lobbies treated the expertise of the DNR as threatening and worked to neutralize it. Agricultural interests had contributed \$550,000 to Walker from 2009 to 2011.³⁸ Milk Source partners and their wives donated \$85,000 to Walker on a single day, December 21, 2011,³⁹ payments that smack of pay-to-play.

Act 122 was one of the reasons that PEPL ultimately found it had negligible legal leverage to affect Rosendale’s environmental practices. As Midwest Environmental Advocates put it, “Years of lobbying by the dairy industry has left Wisconsin with laws that favor factory farms over citizens.”⁴⁰ When the financial scandal broke and newspapers reported the illegal guarantees and transfers from UWO to private investments, PEPL member Elaine Swanson commented, “So taxpayer dollars have been used to financially support an industrial operation we tried to prevent from the beginning? This is a travesty of the worst kind. I think the foundation’s investors and the people have all been duped. Big winner: the CAFO owner.”⁴¹

The battle between PEPL and Rosendale was just one of many similar struggles across the state, some still ongoing, about the impact of large CAFOs on local environments and economies. Community groups, tribes, and family farmers have organized in over a dozen locales in Wisconsin, collectively advancing a vision for economic growth and sustainability that protects the environment and the viability of small and midsize farm operations. When Rosendale opened in 2008, its scale was unprecedented in Wisconsin, but such ventures are becoming the new normal, while family dairy farms have declined precipitously. By Milk Source partner Ostrom’s own admission, “In our business model, it is essential to grow. We’re a more intense, higher input operation that requires higher output.”⁴² In addition to pollution problems, factory dairy farms have flooded the market with milk, driving down prices and making it increasingly difficult for farms to operate on a smaller, less capital-intensive scale. Wisconsin lost 818 dairy farms in 2019, the greatest decline in state history.⁴³ Critics argue that huge dairy farms like Milk Source’s expanding operations undermine diversified local economies and direct profits into fewer hands.

³⁷ Wisconsin State Legislature Records, 2011, Wisconsin Act 122, <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2011/related/acts/122>.

³⁸ Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, “Special Interest Smorgasbord.”

³⁹ Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, “Look Up Contributors,” <https://www.wisdc.org/follow-the-money/campaign-finance-database>, accessed June 5, 2020.

⁴⁰ Midwest Environmental Advocates, “Rosendale Dairy.”

⁴¹ Quoted in Bergquist, “Private Green Energy Deal Did Not Mean Gold for UW-Oshkosh.”

⁴² Quoted in Dickrell, “The Milk Source Way.”

⁴³ Jim Dickrell, “Wisconsin Loses 818 Dairies in 2019, Largest Decline in State History.” *AgWeb Farm Journal*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.agweb.com/article/wisconsin-loses-818-dairies-2019-largest-decline-state-history>.

Manure digesters do have environmental benefits, so it's worth briefly considering their overall impact. Rosendale Dairy's biodigester reduced the impact of odor and toxic ammonia gases on its immediate neighbors. In addition, agriculture is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for up to 25 percent of global emissions; manure management accounts for 7 percent of agriculture's total. The process eliminates some pathogens and the digestate allows for more controlled spreading, lessening the risk of groundwater contamination.⁴⁴ The Rosendale biodigester mitigated air and some water pollution, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, produced a renewable energy source, and generated some revenue.

Manure digesters have limitations, however, including that digesters cannot eliminate phosphates and nitrates and so are not a panacea for the problem of water pollution, though they are often billed that way. They reduce but do not eliminate pathogens. Groundwater contamination is a crisis in Wisconsin as well as in many other agricultural states. In addition, critics argue that digesters prop up an unsustainable model of dairy farming and rural economic development. The high price tag on digesters put them almost always out of reach for small or midsize farms. As capital-intensive solutions to capital-intensive problems, digesters are only available to large factory farms, thereby legitimating and supporting that business model.⁴⁵

In the rush to align public universities with the big economic players in their states, administrators may be undermining, not saving, their institutions. In the world of university funding, large businesses promise revenue and prestige. In Scott Walker's Wisconsin, tapping those privileged sources might have seemed like the best avenue for shifting money from elite private corporations to public institutions, a new twist on the classic function of foundations. But in the case of UWO, it didn't go that way. Money still flowed from public to private coffers, from providing for taxpayers' education to servicing a very large pool of manure.

UWO and the Future of Public Higher Education

As COVID-19 upends our economy, comprehensive public universities like UWO offer unique value but are particularly imperiled. UWO is a case in point. Years of Wisconsin's disinvestment in public higher education combined with an unfunded tuition freeze put UWO in a significant budget crisis even before COVID-19. In

⁴⁴ Gordon, "What Manure Digesters Can and Can't Do"; Gosia Wozniacka, "Are Dairy Digesters the Renewable Energy Answer or a 'False Solution' to Climate Change?," *Civil Eats* (blog), April 24, 2020, <https://civileats.com/2020/04/24/are-dairy-digesters-the-renewable-energy-answer-or-a-false-solution-to-climate-change/>.

⁴⁵ Gordon, "What Manure Digesters Can and Can't Do"; Wozniacka, "Are Dairy Digesters the Renewable Energy Answer or a 'False Solution' to Climate Change?"

March 2015, UWO offered early retirement to faculty and staff, hoping to reduce positions by 5 percent.⁴⁶ In April 2016, the UWO scandal drew the ire of regents, and in 2017 the Foundation declared bankruptcy and gifts to UWO plummeted. Currently, UWO is in the second of a three-year “Fiscal Transformation Plan” that aims to remedy a \$9.5 million deficit through a 10 percent cut to the base budget of academic affairs, virtually all through salary savings. As of the 2019–20 academic year, UWO raised effective teaching loads and laid off adjuncts, saving \$1 million.⁴⁷ Going forward, what can be learned from UWO’s attempts to solve its fiscal crisis by following the neoliberal mantra of pursuing entrepreneurial innovation with corporate partners in order to generate revenue?

Certainly, the Foundation’s use of illegal loan guarantees and transfers must be condemned in no uncertain terms, but the story also points to structural vulnerabilities that pose significant dangers for the future. As private entities, foundations function as black boxes protected from faculty governance or even, in most cases, from having to report their activities.⁴⁸ They also function with new imperatives that can split their loyalties, making them beholden to the business community. Foundations can put their universities at financial risk if they are tempted to leverage public resources for speculative financial ventures, but they can also put the educational mission and reputation to the service of corporate rather than academic priorities. In Oshkosh, the Foundation did not, in fact, have the capital to back these projects. Ironically, its efforts to build an environmentally sustainable campus were built on an unsustainable financial model.

Now is the time to reinvest in public comprehensive universities like UWO as a means of fostering diversified state economies. As a comprehensive university in the Fox River Valley, UWO serves a large number of working- and middle-class students from midsize cities, small towns, and rural areas, including a significant number of students of color, who benefit from attending school near where they live. In addition, 44 percent of UWO’s students are the first generation in their families to attend college.⁴⁹ As unemployment spikes with COVID-19, we can expect demand on such regional universities to increase. In prior economic

⁴⁶ “UW-Oshkosh One of Three Campuses Offering Voluntary Retirement Buyouts as UW System Faces Budget Cuts,” Fox6Now, March 31, 2015, <https://fox6now.com/2015/03/31/uw-oshkosh-one-of-three-campuses-offering-voluntary-retirement-buyouts-as-uw-system-faces-budget-cuts/>.

⁴⁷ Kelly Meyerhofer, “UW-Oshkosh Faculty Workloads Will Increase Next Year in New Cost-Cutting Plan,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 20, 2018, https://madison.com/news/local/education/university/uw-oshkosh-faculty-workloads-will-increase-next-year-in-new-cost-cutting-plan/article_aca70dab-5b63-5533-a6af-c0b939c8e4f8.html; Andrew Leavitt, “Leading a Fiscal Transformation of UW Oshkosh,” Office of the Chancellor UWO, January 29, 2018, <https://uwosh.edu/chancellor/2018/01/leading-fiscal-transformation-uw-oshkosh/>.

⁴⁸ In response to the UWO scandal, the UW System created a white paper and a policy requiring annual reporting on foundations’ activities. “Relationships between the University of Wisconsin and Certain Affiliated Organizations,” State of Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, Report 18-4, March 2018, <https://legis.wisconsin.gov/lab/media/2725/18-4full.pdf>.

⁴⁹ UWO, “Academic Support of Inclusive Excellence,” <https://uwosh.edu/asie/>, accessed July 5, 2020.

downturns, people have returned to school to complete a degree or for retooling in order to increase their options in a tight market. Such students are often beyond the traditional college age and juggle multiple commitments, including child and elder care, that keep them rooted to the area. Many would not be able to travel to Milwaukee or Madison to get an education. In addition, UWO has since its inception been an economic engine for the region in its own right, employing a large number of people and generating a wide range of economic linkages to state and local businesses and social services.

The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 must prompt a new vision of reinvestment in public higher education. In June 2020, the Brookings Institution released a policy study about regional comprehensive universities in the Great Lakes states that argues that such universities are “important assets for fostering economic recovery” after COVID-19. The study calls for an emergency federal fund to protect appropriations to public universities and urges a significant reinvestment to expand, not contract, their educational and research mission. Energy is building from many quarters for robust federal investment in a “New Deal for Higher Education.”⁵⁰

It is time to remember that higher education is a collective resource that belongs to the people of the United States; it is not something to be privatized and redistributed upward to the few. We inherited this precious resource from the generations who came before us. In Wisconsin, they dreamed of a university system with benefits reaching to the furthest corner of the state. On the principles of the Wisconsin Idea, they built one of the best university systems in the world. Why would we throw it away or degrade it when we need it the most?

Nan Enstad is the Buttel-Sewell Professor of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a proud member of the AAUP and AFT. She is the author of Cigarettes Inc.: An Intimate History of Corporate Imperialism (2018) and has published in the Boston Review, Truthout, and the Washington Post. Her website is www.nanenstad.com.

⁵⁰ Robert Maxim and Mark Muro, “Restoring Regional Public Universities for Recovery in the Great Lakes,” Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/restoring-regional-public-universities-for-recovery-in-the-great-lakes/>. See also “A Petition to Support Higher Education in Crisis,” *Academe Blog*, April 29, 2020, <https://academeblog.org/2020/04/29/a-petition-to-support-higher-education-in-crisis/>; the Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education Twitter account at <https://twitter.com/SFNDHE>; and Alyssa Bowen and William Horne, “We Need an Academic New Deal,” *The Nation*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/academic-new-deal/>.