Proud Traditions and Future Challenges—The University of Wisconsin–Madison Celebrates 150 Years

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A Great Undergraduate University

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The Many Meanings of Greatness

It has been commonplace for a very long time now to include the University of Wisconsin–Madison among the small group of American institutions of higher learning that almost always carry the adjective "great" when people across the country and around the world refer to them. More than a century ago, the most famous single sentence in UW history showed no hesitation in asserting the institution's greatness: "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere," wrote the regents in 1894, "we believe that the *great* State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage the continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found." It is of course this historic greatness that we celebrate as we mark the sesquicentennial of the university's founding. But even as we celebrate, it behooves us to think carefully about what exactly we do and do not mean when we apply the adjective "great" to this institution.

The benchmarks of UW–Madison's greatness are not hard to find. Among the crudest is of course sheer size—the large number of students, staff, and faculty members who gather here in their pursuit of knowledge, to say nothing of the buildings and budgets that enable them to do their work—but that is surely not all we

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mean when we speak of the university's greatness. Another is the tradition we celebrate as the Wisconsin Idea, the notion that the university has a special mission to serve the people of the larger commonweal that supports it. No less important a marker of greatness is the university's longstanding commitment to academic freedom, for which that remarkable 1894 sentence has long served both as symbol and as bulwark. And then there is the extraordinary record of research, whether in the sciences or the humanities, which has placed the University of Wisconsin–Madison at the forefront of human knowledge and discovery ever since its inception. Indeed, the explosive growth of federal and philanthropic funding in the decades immediately following World War II has meant that the adjective "great" has more and more frequently been partnered with another adjective—"research"—when applied to the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a handful of other institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Michigan, Berkeley, and a few others. We now speak of these (as we would not have done in quite the same way a century ago) as "great *research* universities," and we pride ourselves for being included among them. Faculty reward systems, institutional measures of self-worth, national rankings, budgets: all now tend to take their bearings from the greatness of the university's research enterprise. Without question, UW–Madison has become a "great research university."

I am second to none in my respect for UW–Madison's commitment to research, and would not myself choose to be a member of its faculty if it were not a "great research university." Still, the question I would like to explore in this chapter relates to another word that might very well be expected to appear (yet rarely does) between the words "great" and "university" in describing this institution and its closest kin. That word is "undergraduate." Is UW–Madison a "great *undergraduate* university"? Even to ask the question is to recognize that this is not the usual way we think of the place: the phrase feels unfamiliar, a little jarring and odd. We're not even quite sure what exactly "a great undergraduate university" is supposed to mean. And therein lies the nub of a crucial challenge, one that will shape the future not just of UW–Madison, but of all research universities in the twenty-first century.

The tendency to define institutional "greatness" without much reference to undergraduate education is a phenomenon by no means limited to UW–Madison. It applies to many of the nation's most distinguished research universities, especially those in the public sector that experienced extraordinary shifts in scale during the post-Sputnik era as their budgets, their physical facilities, their student populations, and their research staffs enjoyed unparalleled growth with the hitherto unheard-of influx of federal and foundation funding. Institutions and faculties that had formerly counted undergraduate teaching among their most important tasks gradually came to see this role as secondary or even tertiary behind professorial research and graduate training. (This shift was most pronounced in the natural and social sciences, but in fact affected all disciplines.) As a result, many seem to have forgotten how much the university's past greatness—and, I would argue, its future greatness as well—are inextricably tied to the excellence of the education it offers its most junior members. If great state universities are to prosper in the decades ahead, we can afford to forget neither this most basic mission, nor the social compact between these institutions and the taxpayers, parents, and students who provide such a large share of the funding that enables research universities to exist.

For me, the most vivid example of how easy it has become to lose track of this social compact is a local one, though parallels would be easy to find at universities across the country. The broader academic culture that this anecdote reflects belongs not just to UW–Madison, but to American higher education at the close of the twentieth century. In the fall of 1995, Dean Phillip Certain released a visionary report entitled *Creating a New College*, itself a response to Chancellor David Ward's mission statement describing the university as a "learning community." In his report, Dean Certain declared that the UW's College of Letters and Science should renew its historic commitment to undergraduate education by significantly improving the quality of its teaching for baccalaureate students. Perhaps surprisingly, the general response to this recommendation on the part of many faculty members bordered on outrage. Many evidently regarded the dean's proposals as misplaced or inappropriate for an institution of UW–Madison's high stature and "greatness." When professors explained their reasons for resisting the report's proposed reforms, they repeated a single sentence as if it were a self-evident refutation of Dean Certain's emphasis on undergraduates: "But this," they said, "is a *research* university!"

The particulars of this old controversy need not concern us here. Dean Certain's report undoubtedly had weaknesses, and faculty members undoubtedly had good reasons to criticize those weaknesses. I do not mean to caricature either side of the debate. But what I nonetheless find both intriguing and suggestive is the ease with which so many professors resorted to the assertion "But this is a *research* university!" to argue against a recommendation that they should devote more time, more energy, and greater care to undergraduate teaching. Implicit in that reaction was a host of assumptions about the university's different missions and their relative importance. Implicit too were deeply held beliefs about institutional greatness, since many faculty members were evidently convinced that a great research university must necessarily be less committed than other schools to undergraduate education.

No one argued against good teaching. No one defended faculty members who ignore their undergraduates. No one denied that the university owes its students a good education. But, curiously enough, few participants in this debate seemed inclined to believe that Dean Certain and his critics might *both* be right: that the university should hold itself to the highest possible standards in *both* realms, teaching no less than research. UW–Madison might be a fine place to earn a baccalaureate, but the controversy surrounding Certain's report suggested that this was not where many faculty members looked when defining the university's true

"greatness." That prize lay elsewhere, in the laboratories anc archives that few undergraduates ever experience at first hand.

Why Even Research Universities Should Care About Undergraduates

My goal in this chapter is to argue on behalf of the middle ground: not *against* great research, but *for* great teaching. I believe that the two are far more complementary, and far more essential to any viable definition of a great university, than the academic culture of the past half-century has typically affirmed. Furthermore, I hold that the familiar dichotomy between research and teaching is not only unnecessary and misleading, but actually threatens the mission and long-term survival even of elite universities that are most deeply committed to their research enterprise. This perceived dichotomy is hardly unique to the University of Wisconsin–Madison; it affects all research universities to at least some degree. The challenge these institutions will face in the tumultuous and often hostile fiscal and political environment of the new century is to reinvigorate their teaching without undermining what is best in their research.

No one should be in doubt about the reality of the hostile environment universities now face. The past two decades have seen the most far-reaching criticisms of American higher education since the McCarthyite days of the Cold War. Some of the most visible attacks have been nakedly ideological, with culture wars and accusations of political correctness adding new vitriol to longstanding campus battles between the Left and the Right. The culture wars have generated well-funded groups and critics with an interest in fueling public doubts about supposedly left-leaning universities, and these have been remarkably effective in attracting media attention to themselves. For tactical reasons, their attacks have not always focused overtly on politics. And so the research/teaching dichotomy has proven to be a convenient weapon: portrayals of faculty members pursuing politically obnoxious and/or trivial research at the expense of their students make for good copy, sell publications, and provide grist for the radio talk-show mills.

But ideological warfare is too easy a scapegoat to explain the situation in which academia now finds itself. More important and more worrisome are numerous calls for greater accountability on the part of colleges and universities, and a widespread perception that these institutions are as arrogant, wasteful, insular, and self-serving as other large organizations that are held in equally low regard by the public. Reflecting the generalized post-Watergate suspicion of once-respected professions and institutions, these calls for accountability have usually been regarded within the academy more as irritating annoyances than as fundamental threats. Few academics seriously entertain the thought that greater accountability might legitimately be warranted—no doubt because they share with other Americans the same suspicions of the arrogant, wasteful, insular, and self-serving institutions that would do the accounting. (Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.)

Responding to such criticisms, faculty and staff members at Wisconsin and elsewhere have begun to develop new teaching initiatives and new undergraduate programs that demonstrate their commitment to students. But the underlying postwar academic culture in which prestige, salary, and other rewards flow almost entirely toward research has been very slow to change. The disconnect between internal and external perceptions of the university's mission thus persists, as do the perils associated with it. Most members of the public continue to believe that what they are primarily buying from universities with their tax dollars and tuition payments is education—and education primarily for undergraduates. In contrast, most faculty members who work in the "great universities" believe that their most valuable and distinguished product, the one on which their personal reputations chiefly rest, is research. Mutual confusion, frustration, and suspicions about inadequate accountability can hardly help but surface in such an environment, with all sorts of dangerous political and fiscal consequences.

One obvious response is for universities to do a much better job of explaining their research activities to a public that too often experiences academic inquiry as opaque and incomprehensible at best, trivial and self-indulgent at worst. Certainly this work of explanation and translation needs to be done, and researchers would do well to tackle it at the most fundamental level. They need to ask not just how they can help the public better understand what they do, but also how their research will make the kind of difference out there in the world that the public might actually care about. If this sounds easy, it is only because academia too often assumes that the answers to such questions are self-evident. They are not.

I will soon argue that one of the best available places for confronting hard questions of this sort is precisely the undergraduate classroom, but for now I want to turn to the other half of the case universities must mount on their own behalf. Yes, absolutely, they must respond to the current political and fiscal environment by defending their research enterprise as passionately and persuasively as they can. But they must also articulate with equal conviction the strength of their commitment to undergraduate education. Here the audience that universities like Wisconsin must persuade is not just a doubting public, but their own students and faculties, who have accumulated many years' worth of good hard evidence that undergraduate teaching is not taken nearly so seriously or rewarded nearly so highly as cutting-edge research.

How does one make a case against such evidence? How does one persuade a research-oriented professoriate to recognize the absolute centrality of undergraduate teaching to the mission of a great university?

One could start with rather crass arguments. Even if one has only the most self-interested reasons for making sure that a place like Wisconsin can honestly claim to be a "great undergraduate university," self-interested reasons can still be pretty compelling. Here are a few that spring to mind.

Undergraduates are the main reason taxpayers and parents support the university. Because professors know that the national fame of their departments (and therefore, by extension, their own reputations) depends on how other academics view the quality of their research and the stature of their graduate programs, they too easily forget that such fame is not the main reason that the taxpayers of Wisconsin and other states (to say nothing of the nation as a whole) support institutions like UW–Madison. Neither is it the main reason that students and their parents pay tuition bills. The extraordinary public good will that American colleges and universities have long enjoyed has flowed first and foremost from a powerful commitment especially on the part of parents, but more generally society as a whole, to provide the best possible education to much-loved children as they leave home and stand on the threshold of adulthood. To raise doubts in the minds of parents and citizens about whether research universities share this powerful, almost sacred intergenerational commitment is perilous indeed—even, one might say, suicidal. Yet this is precisely what an overriding commitment to excellence in research conveys unless it is always coupled with an equally stalwart commitment to excellence in teaching.

It is easy to assert that Wisconsin's best undergraduates benefit from attending a world-class research university. It is harder to prove that the institution consistently makes good on this claim. I would not for a moment deny that UW–Madison has made great strides in improving undergraduate advising and teaching over the past decade, and there are certainly statistics that can demonstrate this. But the questions I have in mind about the place of undergraduates in a research university run deeper, and are not so easily answered with mere statistics. They have to do with the intimate human relationships that lie at the heart of teaching and learning, the caring and nurturing and mentoring that happen when students find themselves in a place that really challenges and helps them grow. Are we confident that most UW–Madison undergraduates gain as much as we would hope from attending this great research university? Are faculty and staff members confident enough of their answer to this question that they would unhesitatingly send their own child to UW–Madison if money were no object and they had complete freedom to choose the school that would give their child the best possible undergraduate experience? And what might the university do to assure that the preponderant answer to both these questions will be "yes"? I offer these questions *not* as implied criticisms of UW–Madison, but as moral touchstones to which all colleges and universities must perennially return if they are to fulfill their own highest ideals. Although no legislative audit will ever do justice to them, *these* are the criteria by which a great undergraduate university must hold itself accountable.

Improving undergraduate education at UW–Madison and other research universities requires an honest recognition that not all criticisms of such places—about the ways in which faculty research and graduate education can sometimes detract from undergraduate teaching—are without merit. If universities want parents and other citizens to keep supporting the work they do, they must make absolutely certain that they do the best possible job of delivering the core services—teaching and mentoring beloved children into adulthood—that parents and citizens so earnestly desire. As an alumnus of this university who feels nothing but the deepest gratitude for the education I received from UW–Madison, my own conviction is that a great research university can offer as good an undergraduate education as any institution on the planet . . . but it will fail to deliver this unless it places undergraduate teaching at the heart of its mission. And if it fails to do so, it will have only itself to blame when disappointed taxpayers and parents decide to send their money elsewhere.

Undergraduates soon become the alumni who play an indispensable role in supporting the long-term health of UW–Madison. It has long been true that the private liberal arts colleges of the United States have done a better job than other institutions of upholding the core values of liberal education and undergraduate teaching, but even the great private research universities seem generally to be more attentive to their undergraduates than the great public research universities. Places like Princeton or Yale or Stanford go to extraordinary lengths to make sure their students feel great satisfaction with the education they receive, far more so than at places like Berkeley or Michigan or Wisconsin. Although this may seem paradoxical, given the tradition of outreach and service that is so central to public institutions like UW–Madison, there are good practical reasons for the phenomenon.

One reason involves the sheer number of students that the public universities serve. It is much harder to make 25,000 undergraduates feel that each one of them is a special individual with special talents and special needs, or that they belong to a special community and are receiving a special educational experience, than it is to do the same for 1,000 or 5,000 or even 10,000. Quite apart from this problem of scale, there are good financial reasons as well for the different ways private and public institutions regard their students. When undergraduate tuition soars to the levels it does at the private schools, each individual undergraduate, on a per capita basis, represents a much more significant share of the institutional income stream. It takes just two or three undergraduate tuitions to pay an assistant professor's salary at an elite private school; it takes many times that number to do the same at a place like Wisconsin.

Most importantly, private universities for a very long time have understood much better than public ones that happy undergraduates become loyal alumni, and loyal alumni become the benefactors who underwrite a university's future greatness. As every development officer has good reason to know, the bulk of alumni gifts come more frequently from former undergraduates than from former graduate students. If one is interested in cultivating future philanthropic giving, it would be foolish indeed to emphasize one's commitment to graduate students at the expense of undergraduates. Even if a university were completely indifferent to the nobler goals of undergraduate education, it would be extraordinarily short-sighted to forego the task of nurturing this future income stream. Yet this is precisely what public universities have tended to do, at least when compared with their private counterparts.

And there is still one more angle to consider. As a state university, most of UW–Madison's future alumni will become future state taxpayers (to say nothing of those who end up as future legislators and governors!). Even if alumni choose not to make private gifts of their own, their view of their alma mater will crucially affect their behavior in the voting booth. It is alumni—former undergraduates—who will tell other citizens of the state whether they think the university is being a good steward of the money (and the young adults) that comes its way. When professors complain about legislators who speak ill of UW–Madison in the State Capitol, they should perhaps consider whether those criticisms arise from first-hand experience of what it means to be a student at this school. By being anything less than a great undergraduate university, UW–Madison runs the risk not just of failing to nurture alumni donations but also of undermining its future support from taxpayers. No one should be under any illusions about how dangerous this would be to the university's long-term health and prosperity. If for no other reason than to sustain its research enterprise, UW–Madison cannot afford to be anything less than a great undergraduate university. A chief lesson to learn from private institutions is the importance of treating current undergraduates as future alumni, with the respect and gratitude that both groups deserve for the many generous ways they support the university.

Even if the one institutional goal were only to train graduate students, helping them become first-rate undergraduate teachers is central to that goal. However important undergraduates may be to the university's political and economic health, some faculty members will nonetheless continue to regard graduate teaching as their most important pedagogy. Having committed oneself to the deep, rigorous knowledge of a particular discipline, it's easy to imagine that one's most important task is to pass on this knowledge to students who are equally committed to the discipline. (Never mind the obvious point that graduate students began their careers as undergraduates and presumably came to their calling because some great teacher helped motivate them to go deeper into the subject.) A different kind of instrumental logic on behalf of undergraduates may prove more persuasive for those who focus mainly on graduate students. Doctoral students who will ultimately be successful in securing employment in their own disciplines, will, for the most part, obtain jobs in which they are primarily paid to *teach*. Unless they have had the experience of doing first-rate undergraduate teaching while attending graduate school, and have watched and learned from faculty members who regard this as one of the most important missions (along *with* research) of their professional life, graduate students will not learn to be the kind of teachers that other institutions will want to hire. And so, ironically, the stature of a university's graduate programs can suffer from the weakness in its undergraduate ones.

Paying graduate students to serve as teaching assistants is not by itself enough to assure that they are receiving first-rate preparation as undergraduate teachers. At too many institutions, professors regard teaching assistants as an excuse for not having to waste their time on the nitty-gritty details of designing syllabi, leading discussion sections, writing exams, making thoughtful criticisms, grading fairly, and having real face-to-face relationships with undergraduates other than from behind a podium. If graduate students are to learn how to teach, they must witness great teaching at first hand, from faculty members who deliver great lectures but who also design great syllabi, lead great discussion sections, prepare great exams and paper assignments, and serve as great mentors. By constantly displaying their own deep commitment to undergraduate teaching, professors can demonstrate the skills and techniques that will prepare graduate students for the jobs they will soon be competing to secure. An institution that fails to prepare graduate students to be great undergraduate teachers in this way fails willy-nilly to deliver the world-class *graduate* training on which its own reputation in part depends. Its Ph.D.'s eventually stop obtaining jobs at the best colleges and universities in the country, and the university's own reputation and stature decline accordingly. If UW–Madison wishes to avoid such a fate, it must make sure that it keeps its graduate programs in constant dialogue with its undergraduate ones.

Higher Truths

Convincing as they may be, these self-serving, instrumental reasons for making sure that a great university offers its undergraduates the best possible educational experience are not finally the most persuasive ones. In fact, undergraduate teaching is every bit as important as research to the mission even of a research university, because without the ability to interpret, translate, and communicate what they do, the work of scholars and scientists remains inert and of little value to anyone but themselves. If this is so, then one can make additional arguments on behalf of undergraduate teaching that are all the more compelling because they speak to the university's highest ideals.

Undergraduates are the university's best protection against forgetting how its work relates to the larger public. There is much talk these days about the decline of the public intellectual, about the isolation of the academy from civic life. There cannot be much question that the growing specialization of the academic disciplines, for all the intellectual power this process has generated, has had the unfortunate consequence of isolating academic intellectuals from the larger realm of public discourse. Indeed, it has made it hard for professors even to understand *each other's* work, let alone communicate the meaning of what they do to members of the public who are mystified about whether academic work has any larger value.

How do we reverse this trend? How do those inside the academy learn to communicate more effectively with members of the general public? My own answer is that professors need constantly to remember that they meet the public every day in their classrooms. There is no better way to learn how to communicate one's ideas in forceful, compelling, ordinary English prose than to try to persuade bright undergraduates that those ideas are not only important, but fascinating. If all faculty members regarded their undergraduate classrooms as the place where they learn how to talk and write about their work in ways that make it accessible and even exciting to a wider audience, not only would their teaching improve, but so would their writing and public outreach. This, surely, is what the Wisconsin Idea is supposed to be all about.

Learning how to translate the arcane knowledge of an academic discipline into the realm of public discourse is uniquely a benefit (and a benefit for far more than just professors) that flows from first-rate undergraduate teaching. Graduate students, who have already committed themselves to the disciplinary identity of their faculty mentors, by definition are already aspiring to learn the difficult private languages of the academy: they desire to speak those languages for themselves, not to have them be translated and rendered more accessible. Because undergraduates have not made a comparable commitment, they are always asking to be persuaded that the material they are learning is really worthwhile—a challenge any good teacher must always be prepared to meet with energy and passion. Bright, curious, doubting sophomores are far better surrogates than their older peers for the "lay" audiences that academic intellectuals are forever tempted to forget or ignore, albeit at their own peril. Without undergraduates, professors too easily forget how to talk with anyone but themselves.

Far more so than in research or graduate teaching, the undergraduate curriculum is where the work of disciplinary synthesis occurs. What happens in the undergraduate classroom is not just the translation of complex ideas and arcane vocabularies into ordinary language. Rather, the undergraduate curriculum forces disciplinary specialists to grapple with what their own disciplines constantly encourage them to evade: the profound question of how the diverse intellectual perspectives of the modern academy come together to produce a coherent (or at least richly complex and interconnected) view of the world and of the human experience within it. Undergraduate teaching, if done right, is where research scholars and scientists cannot avoid the tasks of synthesis and integration that are essential counterpoints to the analysis and specialization that ordinarily typify the research enterprise.

Too often, universities rely on a menu of curricular requirements, forcing students to take a diverse set of courses, which, when combined together, will supposedly yield a broad general education. Faculty members rarely bother to ask whether they themselves could integrate knowledge across the intellectual terrain they are forcing their students to navigate. It is hard to imagine the modern college curriculum without distributional requirements, but by themselves these are a sorry substitute for the far more difficult task of trying to find the common ground, for instance, among such achievements of the modern academy as the deciphering of Linear B, the discovery of plate tectonics, the DNA sequencing of the human genome, the critical exegesis of Emily Dickinson or James Joyce or Toni Morrison, and the management of modern economies via the manipulation of interest rates by central banks. Undergraduates are asked to take courses on subjects such as these all the time, but how often are they or their teachers asked to make sense of the interstices that lie in between? Is the extraordinary storehouse of understanding and knowledge that constitutes the modern university more than just the sum of its parts? Do faculty and staff members offer their students a coherent or unified or integrated view of what the *uni*-versity as a whole has to offer?

No one, surely, has definitive answers to questions like these, but that is no reason they shouldn't be asked, over and over again. And the fact that such questions are by their nature rather "sophomoric" is precisely their value: it is sophomores who force experts to keep returning to first principles to ask "Big Questions." Experts are surely the better for having to do so. One of the chief benefits of sophomoric "Big Questions" is that sooner or later they always circle back to questions of value and meaning about how parts relate to a greater whole. Along the way, they remind one that mere technical expertise is rarely enough to supply the passionate caring that can turn mere "disciplines" or "subjects" into profoundly moving ways of engaging the world. And this in turn teaches one final lesson which is very near the heart of what a great university should finally be all about.

More than anywhere else, the undergraduate classroom is where students and teachers come together to reaffirm and transmit from one generation to the next the love of learning and the life of the mind. If working closely with undergraduates can keep reminding professors of the need for translation and synthesis and the sharing of intellectual passion, it can transform not just students but teachers as well. It reminds scholars and scientists as few other activities do why and how their work matters out in the larger world. The greatest joy of undergraduate teaching is in watching the profound acts of human discovery—the dawning of new perspectives and new insights and new ideas—that happen over and over again in the classroom. Witnessing this and serving as this kind of catalyst for moments of undergraduate discovery is one of the greatest privileges of working at a college or university. But to fully appreciate the power of this role, professors must choose to be present for it, and too many faculty members don't allow themselves the time or the energy or the direct involvement with undergraduates even to notice the kind of catalyst—welcoming or forbidding, stimulating or stultifying, sought-after or avoided, beloved or despised—that they could become for the young people they serve.

In conversations with colleagues at Wisconsin and elsewhere, I have been struck by the number of senior professors who, after long years of being committed first and foremost to their own research productivity, become newly engaged with undergraduates (and critical of their own earlier relative inattention to these most junior of the university's students) as they send their own children off to college. Now finding themselves vicariously at the receiving end of the university's pedagogy, they suddenly gain a view of the classroom from the opposite side of the lectern, and what they see is not always flattering. Having believed that the primary measure of a university's "greatness" was its research, they now recognize with some surprise that this is not what they themselves care most about for their own children: what they want is a great *undergraduate* university or college. Although one might cynically regard this as a case of yuppie parents selfishly seeking the best for their own, in fact I've seen such parents throw themselves into the classroom with a will and an energy that they had not always brought to their teaching before. What I see them trying to share is not just their technical expertise, but their passion, their commitment to the life of the mind, and their desire to help young people who are much like their own children discover these things for themselves. Any institution that can sustain a culture in which professors regard the love of learning as the single most important gift they pass along to their students (a gift they would want their own children to possess) can be pretty confident that its greatness will not be limited merely to what goes on in the archive or the laboratory.

One small step in this direction might be to mandate that every faculty member not just teach undergraduates in big lecture courses, but lead undergraduate seminars and discussion sections (and direct senior theses) as well. Teaching assistants should not be the only academics who regularly meet in small-group settings with freshmen and sophomores. Even a reform as seemingly trivial and mechanical as this would mean that every professor could get to know at least a few undergraduates by name, and that every student could interact in a more personal way with at least a few senior faculty members, thereby encouraging the kinds of human relationships that only happen when people know each other's names. (For much the same reason, there is a lot to be said for having administrators continue to teach small undergraduate classes as a way to experience the concrete effects of university policies at first hand.) This may feel like extra work—an incremental teaching load beyond the burden professors and administrators think they should have to bear—but the benefits not just to teaching but to research and outreach are so great that in fact the time could hardly be better spent. Giving up a few extra committee meetings in return for encouraging a few more interactions between undergraduates and faculty members can hardly hurt the university. For it is in the resulting conversations—not lectures, but *conversations*—that students and professors come to know each other well enough to learn at first hand the ways in which a great research university can also be—*must* also be—a great undergraduate university.

What a Great Undergraduate University Teaches

What are the characteristics we would expect to find in a "great undergraduate university"? How do we know whether a research university deserves to be called "great" in the eyes of its undergraduates?

Most simply, a great undergraduate university is a place where everyone—faculty, staff, and students—understands that teaching is at the absolute core of the university's mission; where teaching is viewed not as a distraction from the "real" work of research, but as an essential complement to it. Such a university works to make sure that faculty members never lose sight of the intimate linkage between research and teaching. This is far from

an easy task, because the professional culture and narrow self-interests of faculty members too often seem to point *away* from the classroom. It takes a self-conscious commitment on the part of the institution as a whole to make sure professors are regularly brought back into dialogue with undergraduates, not as an obligation but as a high calling that the university itself both celebrates and rewards. Individual professors inevitably see their disciplines and their own research as ends in themselves requiring no further defense or justification, and this, curiously, can be an important source of trouble in the classroom. If teachers assume that their own subjects are already fascinating, if they fail to see that one of their primary tasks is to persuade students to fall in love with those subjects, then the classrooms in which they work are unlikely ever to come alive. A university whose culture genuinely nurtures first-rate teaching regularly reminds faculty members that, from an undergraduate's point of view, they and their disciplines are almost always a means to other ends, rarely ends in themselves. Everything about professors—who they are, what they most care about, and why they do what they do—tempts them to forget this fundamental fact, thereby undermining their effectiveness as teachers.

Certainly, professors teach undergraduates arcane knowledge and technical skills, and good teachers struggle to do this as well as they can. But good teachers also never lose track of the much deeper lessons about life and the world that lie far beneath the surface of even the most essential information. It is these deeper lessons that students are most likely to remember in the long run, and I would include among them the following:

- How to care passionately about ideas, both one's own and those of other people;
- How to follow and make logical arguments;
- How to recognize rigor, probing always to test for false assumptions and biases;
- How to write;
- How to talk;

- How to navigate the world of numbers;
- How to watch and learn from the world as scientists and poets do;
- How to gain from other people's diverse experiences, talents, and passions;
- How to make friends who are very different from oneself;
- How to practice tolerance while still articulating and defending one's own beliefs;
- How to dream adult dreams, imagining and working toward the goal of a fulfilled adult life;
- How to empower oneself and one's community;
- How to get things done and make a difference in the world.

Any institution that succeeds in teaching such lessons to even a sizable fraction of its students is a great undergraduate university indeed, benefiting not just its students and itself, but the larger community it serves. These deeper lessons of undergraduate education are conveyed as much by the *way* professors teach, the *way* they share their lives and passions with students, as by the substantive content of their courses. I hasten to add that the substantive content of courses hardly plays a trivial or unimportant role, for the paradox of these deep life lessons, if they are to be truly learned and earned, is that they can only be taught indirectly, via a rigorous encounter with a substance and discipline that resist the callow assumptions of an untrained sophomoric mind. And the "love of learning" that a great teacher shares is not an abstract love, but a deeply committed passion for a very particular body of knowledge and inquiry, more often than not acquired in the practice of doing research. The content of the course, the content of the curriculum, the pedagogical expression of the research enterprise: these are absolutely crucial. And yet—this is the other half of the paradox—I'm also convinced that most of the information undergraduates learn in their classes vanishes from memory within a few weeks, a few months, a few years. If professors had to justify their salaries on the basis of how many

students could pass a detailed examination on the content of their classes twenty or thirty years after graduation, few professors would stay employed for long. But if those courses were taught well, if the teacher really connected with the students and shared something profound in the time they spent together, then there need be no fear that the deeper lessons will fail to last a lifetime. Once learned, they will not soon be forgotten.

This is why universities must work to sustain a culture in which professors regularly ask themselves whether their teaching actually delivers what students most need to learn. If their particular course were the only chance professors had to pass on to their own children not just the content of a discipline but an understanding of how that discipline connects to the world and to a life well lived, what would the resulting course look like? A course designed in response to such a question is bound to look rather different from one in which formal disciplinary content is the teacher's sole concern, and professors fool themselves if they don't know in their hearts which kind of course students would prefer to take. Indeed, one has only to think back on the courses one most remembers from one's own undergraduate years to know what it takes to leave a lasting mark on students. Good teachers from time to time revisit in their memory those cherished classes of long ago—revisit them in gratitude and wonder—to remind themselves of the kinds of legacies that a great class, a great teacher, a great university can leave.

If we remember that *these* are our goals—that *these* are the most basic things we teach—then there are few better places than a research university for undergraduates to acquire an education. There are, after all, few more passionate realms in which the life of the mind intersects with the broader life of the world than in research (broadly understood as the struggle to make sense of the world), whether this entails understanding the inner architecture of matter, the history of life on earth, or the moral struggle for human justice. If the university strives constantly to share its research enterprise with undergraduates (whether by bringing faculty research experience into the classroom or by drawing undergraduates into doing research themselves, as UW–Madison has done so successfully with its senior honors theses and Hilldale Fellowships) it will be giving those students something quite irreplaceable. The pedagogical value of research arises *not* because students will go on to be academic researchers—most of course will not—but because this kind of engagement in fact translates into virtually every imaginable walk of life, whether in law or medicine or farming or art or public policy or community organizing.

To repeat: my own deepest faith is that no university can be truly great if it sees research as its only or most crucial mission. Unless universities couple the rigor and depth of their research enterprise with the breadth and delight that come from great undergraduate teaching, they will not only fail to defend themselves against those who believe they aren't doing the work they are paid to do . . . they will in fact betray their own best vision of what an institution of higher learning should be. The task of universities is not just to discover knowledge. It is also to translate and share that knowledge so that everyone—freshman and sophomores and members of the public as well as faculty colleagues and graduate students—can understand and appreciate its importance and power. Moreover, if professors fail in their teaching to inspire undergraduates in the same ways that they themselves were inspired to pursue the vision of excellence that has shaped their own adult lives, if they fall short in this task of inspiration, then at some very deep level they will be leaving the most important work of a great university to someone else.

And so this is why I find myself hoping for a different rejoinder the next time a debate occurs (whether at Wisconsin or elsewhere) in which someone responds to calls for improved undergraduate education by saying, "But this is a *research* university!" I hope students and teachers will leap into the fray by insisting with equal conviction: "But it must also be a great *undergraduate* university!" Because unless both of these statements are true, and true in equal measure, no university can be truly great.