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The Distance from Public Institutions of Higher Education
Public Perceptions of UW–Madison

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Abstract

Public opinion matters for the administration of public higher education. Yet, we know little about how members of the public conceptualize these institutions in general, and UW-Madison in particular. This study investigates how Wisconsinites think about UW-Madison through investigations of conversations regularly occurring among 36 groups sampled from 27 communities statewide. It reveals a pervasive sense of distance from UW-Madison that is part of a broader sense of disconnection from institutions of authority. The implication is that positive relationships between UW-Madison and the mass public will require innovative means of listening and relationship building.

Introduction

This report details the results of research designed to improve the relationship between UW-Madison and the broader public. The concern with that relationship marks much of higher education these days. Life on campus is turning toward life outside it in the new “scholarship of engagement” (Boyer, 1996, 1990). The push for service-learning and community-based research exemplify this trend (Butin 2006, p. 473-4; see also Allen 2004; Furco and Billig, 2002; Jacoby, 2009; Percy, Zimpher, & Brukardt, 2006; Stanton, Giles and Cruz, 1999). As colleges and universities attempt to meet the challenge of contemporary society (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 203) and to comply with revisions in the Carnegie Foundation classification system and regional accreditation standards (Weerts & Sandman, 2008, p. 74), UW-Madison, like higher education institutions of all sizes, is making new and renewed attempts to build connections with the publics they serve.

We can see this preoccupation with the appropriate link between higher education and the rest of society in recent battles within our state legislature, and UW System governance, just as we can see it within government institutions that oversee public colleges and universities across the nation. While scholars ponder how universities ought to serve the public good (Kezar, 2004, Kezar, Chambers, Burkardt, et al., 2005; Shapiro, 2005), state and federal public officials throughout the country are calling into question mechanisms of accountability (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Heller, 2001; Schmidlein & Berndahl, 2005).

The concern with the link between the public and higher education institutions is most acute when it comes to money. The rising costs of higher education troubles those within academia as well as those in the broader public (Archibald & Feldman, 2008;

Callan, 2001; Weerts & Ronca, 2006). In the case of public institutions like our own, increasing privatization and declining government support feed this concern (Hovey, 1999; Lyall & Sell, 2005; Priest & St. John, 2006; Santos, 2007).

What should be the appropriate link between a public university and the public? How much say should the public have in what we do, and is that even the right way to think about it? One way to think about these questions is to borrow from my own discipline and get some purchase from alternative models of democratic representation. As with government institutions, so it goes with institutions of higher education: members of the mass public do not directly take part in the decision-making. Instead they communicate their preferences through electing representatives who make choices on their behalf. The form this representation takes is not a given. Representatives can serve as *delegates*—they directly respond to public opinion. Alternatively, they could also serve as *trustees*, representatives who take public opinion into account but weigh it against their own expertise and process it through debate (Pitkin, 1967; Burke, 1774). Whereas delegates cast votes as if their constituents were pulling the lever, trustees ponder their constituents' wishes, then pull the lever their own deliberations suggest is best.

Whatever model of representation higher education administrators adopt, public opinion remains an important force. It is an especially potent force in the governance of high-profile public universities like UW-Madison, given that the elected officials who approve and legislate financial support for these institutions, and appoint the governing board or Regents (i.e., state legislators and the governor) are directly accountable to the public through elections. If we are to maintain or perhaps revive the state's support for UW-Madison, we need to examine the benefits of higher education and also ways in

which we can better serve the state (Weerts & Ronca, 2006, p. 937-938)—and both tasks require renewed attention to public opinion towards UW-Madison.

Public opinion toward UW-Madison also deserves our attention given our proclaimed allegiance to The Wisconsin Idea. If we really believe in serving people beyond the borders of our campus, we need to pay attention to the perspectives of people in those communities. In particular, we need to listen to people in communities beyond campus, rather than assuming we are the experts (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Building sustainable relationships with members of the broader public, as opposed to merely packaging initiatives in a sellable form, requires examining public perceptions as people express them in their own terms, in the settings of their everyday lives.

This study investigates public opinion toward UW-Madison through a method that reveals how members of the public understand our university and their relationship to institutions of higher education. I used “listening investigations” of regularly occurring groups throughout Wisconsin to probe their perceptions. The results reveal a widespread sense that the state’s flagship university is inattentive to the concerns of members of the public-at-large. This perception is not unique to UW-Madison, however. A wide range of people view other institutions with authority in the same light. The implication is that positive relationships between UW-Madison and the mass public will require innovative means of communication that involve sincere listening and relationship building. After explaining the methods, and considering these results in detail, the paper argues for new ways of listening to members of the public, as opposed to merely more communication.

Methods

My intent with this study was to help us understand the public's perceptions toward UW-Madison, but it should be noted that this particular case can illuminate perceptions toward public institutions of higher education more generally. Since UW-Madison is a land-grant institution, and also the university that originated statewide extension services (Chambers 2005, p. 14; see also Alperovitz, Dubb, & Howard, 2008; McDowell, 2001), it represents a case in which members of the public might expect that the university is accessible.

I examined these perceptions by studying conversations among regularly occurring groups. My intent was to examine perceptions of the flagship university in a “naturalistic” way (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). I wanted to hear them as they emerged in conversation among people who regularly spend time with one another in the settings that they normally do so. I chose the sites of my study by sampling particular communities using a stratified purposeful approach (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 28). First, I categorized the counties in Wisconsin into 8 distinct regions, based on partisan leaning, median household income, population density, size of community, racial and ethnic heterogeneity, local industry, and agricultural background. Within each of these areas, I then purposively chose the city or population center in that region (or randomly selected it if there were multiple central cities), and randomly chose a smaller municipality. I chose several additional municipalities to provide additional variation. I included 27 communities in the study by using this procedure.

To find the groups that I studied, I asked for advice from county-based University of Wisconsin Extension offices, local newspaper editors, and local leaders. In each

community, I sought a group of people who met regularly and casually of their own accord in a neighborhood gathering place to which I could gain access. These groups were typically informal groups that met in local restaurants, cafés or gas stations early on weekday mornings, or groups that met regularly in a local place of worship. [Please see Appendix A for descriptions of these groups and communities.]

Throughout this paper, I refrain from identifying municipalities by name (except Milwaukee and Madison which are sufficiently large to conceal the identity of the groups) and use pseudonyms to refer to the people I observed. I visited each group between 1 and 5 times between May 2007 and May 2011. When possible, I spent time with multiple groups in a given municipality to provide greater demographic variation.

The visits, or “listening investigations,”¹ took the following form. The first time I investigated the conversations in a given group, I arrived at the location at the time an informant suggested that a group of regulars would be meeting. I greeted the regulars and asked for their permission to sit with them. I explained that I was a public opinion researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, traveling around the state to get a sense of the issues people were concerned with and their ideas about how the university could better serve the people of the state. I asked for their permission to record our conversation, and passed out “small tokens of my appreciation” for their time— incentives donated from the University of Wisconsin Alumni Association, such as UW football schedules. I then asked, “What are the big concerns for people in this community?” and continued with other questions in my protocol [please see Appendix B], eliminating some questions if the group began to dissipate, and reordering the questions if a group mentioned a topic before I raised it. I asked three main questions

about the university: “What, in your opinion, does the UW-Madison currently do well?” “What, in your opinion, can UW-Madison do better?” And, “What should the university be doing in your community?”ⁱⁱ All of the conversations were recorded and transcribed, except for two groups whose members did not wish to be recorded. For these groups, I took handwritten notes as we talked.

My strategy for finding groups with which to conduct these investigations meant that the people I spent time with were predominantly male, non-Hispanic Caucasian, and of retirement age. Of the 36 groups I studied, 12 were composed of only men, 3 were exclusively female, and the rest were of mixed gender, but predominantly male. Six of the groups were composed solely of retirees, and 5 of people currently employed (or unemployed). The rest were composed of a mix of retirees and currently employed people, though the majority of these groups were retirees. Four of the groups were 4H groups, to provide some insight on the concerns of younger people. Each of the groups were composed of people of a similar occupational and educational background, although almost all groups contained some variety in that respect. For example, a group of loggers on their way to work readily acknowledged that one of their members was a local public official and one was a real estate agent.

While my sampling strategy resulted in a bias toward retired men, it also resulted in a bias toward local opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Their views of UW-Madison may not be representative, but they are likely consequential for the way others in their community think about the university. This slice of opinion leaders varied across the municipalities I sampled, because I had chosen the communities to vary by key community characteristics, as explained above.

For example, although the groups often contained business leaders, in some places these people were executives of multi-national corporations, in others, the owners of the businesses on Main Street.

To ensure that I spoke with people of a range of ethnic backgrounds and income levels I purposively included a group of American Indians living on a reservation, a group of African-Americans meeting through a Baptist church, a group of Mexican immigrants waiting for medical treatment at a pro bono clinic, resident volunteers at a food pantry in government-assisted housing, as well as several groups of professionals. The result was conversations with people who ranged from “one step from homelessness” to wealthy business owners.

My sample is not representative of all Wisconsinites. The purpose of the study is not to describe perceptions of the UW-Madison across the entire state. Instead, the purpose is to explain the nature of such connections in-depth across a broad enough range of people that we can generate a better understanding of perceptions of the university as they arise in the social networks and physical settings of residents’ everyday lives. Pursuing these types of questions is best achieved through intensive study of conversations, studied through immersion in a range of particular communities, rather than through a cross-sectional phone survey in which we force respondents to pigeon-hole themselves into the response categories we a priori believe are suitable, and gather little information on the contexts from which they are responding.

To conduct my analyses, I combed through the transcripts to code the conversations for topics mentioned and type of topics offered in response to my three main higher education questions. As I did so, I took notes on the patterns that I noticed. I

then reread the transcripts to code for instances of these patterns. I prepared visual displays of my data by creating matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which the rows represented the various groups in my sample, and the columns included demographic information about the groups and the communities in which they were located, as well as examples of patterns I had noticed. This allowed me to test whether or not the patterns were as pervasive as I had first concluded, and whether they varied across type of group.ⁱⁱⁱ To further verify my conclusions, I considered how the conversations might have been affected by my presence, triangulated my results against national survey data, re-examined conversations that were not consistent with the patterns I identified, considered spurious relations, added additional groups to the study to investigate whether conversations among people of different demographic backgrounds exhibited patterns similar to the groups already in my study, and sent detailed reports of my results to the groups I had visited and gave them brief verbal reports on subsequent visits so that they could comment on the conclusions I was reaching.^{iv}

When considering possible researcher effects, I started from the presumption that my presence altered these conversations. I intentionally steered the course of the conversations, and the participants likely altered what they said somewhat because of my presence. On those occasions in which I sat in the restaurant, café, etc. for a short while before asking the group for permission to join them, I was able to get a glimpse of what their talk was like when they were not aware I was observing them. Consistent with previous work in this vein (Walsh, 2004), the members of these groups appeared to swear less and talk about public affairs slightly more when they knew I was listening. Also, given the conventions of polite conversation, one might expect that they refrained from

making overly critical remarks about the university. However, many people remarked that they saw my visit as a rare opportunity to vent their concerns about the institution, and I was surprised by how critical many of their comments were.

Results

The responses to three simple questions that I asked these regularly occurring groups of people about the University of Wisconsin-Madison reveal a great deal about the way people understand our university. Many of their perceptions appeared to be largely media driven; they often mimicked recent newspaper headlines and top television news stories. However, personal experiences also informed the conversations. Many of the groups contained one or more alumni, and almost all groups contained someone who had a relative who had recently attended the university. Those who declared they were alumni were universally positive about the institution. All groups had something positive to say about the university. However, the comments in response to “what does the UW-Madison currently do well” tended to be brief and general, and asking the same question on a second, third, or fourth visit to a group never obtained additional unique answers. When I asked, “What could the UW-Madison do better?” the answers were much more elaborate and specific, and return visits typically elicited additional complaints. The following section details these comments.

What Do We Do Well?

When I asked the groups, “What does the UW-Madison do well?” the members typically would respond immediately with “Football” or “Basketball” or “Hockey” or

“Sports.” Often they would laugh a little, as if this were not a legitimate response. However, the regularity of this response supports the idea that athletics is a major topic of mass media, and a major way that the public connects with public universities (Duderstadt, 2000). The second most common response was “the marching band”—again, more likely a connection akin to the common connection to Badger athletics than to a reverence for arts and music on the campus.

Is it problematic that the first thing that typically comes to mind when thinking about what a state’s flagship university does well is sports? Perhaps many employees on campus outside the athletic department would be more comforted if the most common response were research or teaching undergraduates. However, sports reach people in a visceral way that research is not likely to. Also, Bucky Badger and our team colors symbolize positive feelings toward an institution that perhaps encapsulate respect for other aspects of the institution as well.

One bit of evidence in this respect is that fondness for the band and sports *was* typically followed up with respect for the research and teaching on campus. I heard many positive comments about stem cell research, a prominent news topic during the time of my study, as well as heartfelt stories about positive experiences at the UW Hospital. Also, people would sum up their answers by saying something like, “The university has a great overall reputation. Provides an excellent education.”

What Do We Do Not So Well?

The groups I visited made several common complaints about the university. First, people were concerned with admissions. They worried that admissions policies favored

out-of-state and international students at the expense of in-state students. Many groups told stories of an excellent student in their community who had recently been denied admission. These sentiments are consistent with national public opinion poll data that suggests there is a widespread belief that “colleges could take a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices.”^v

A second common concern was worries about the cost of tuition. This is also clearly a nationwide concern, as national public opinion polls demonstrate. For example, an April 2009 Associated Press poll found that 33% of U.S. adults (not just parents) worry “a lot” and 16% worry “some” about “having enough money to send your children to college.”^{vi}

Another prominent response was perhaps more unique to UW-Madison: a pervasive worry about the extent of drinking and partying among UW-Madison students. Widespread news coverage of Halloween riots in the early 2000s perhaps fueled the long-held view that UW-Madison is a party school.

Many comments referred to faculty. In short, the people I talked with often remarked that faculty are “lazy,” “liberal,” and “elitist.” “Lazy” referred to the perceptions that professors rarely were in the classroom and instead delegated too much of their teaching duties to teaching assistants. “Liberal” comments were often made in reference to a perception that the faculty are much more socially and politically liberal than the average Wisconsinite and indoctrinate students with these views. Finally, “elitist” referred to an awareness that faculty salaries are higher than the average Wisconsinite’s, as well as to a belief that faculty are unaware and inattentive to the concerns and interests of ordinary citizens.

What Should We Be Doing in Your Community?

Many of the comments made in response to what the university is not doing well suggested a distance from the university. When I asked, “What *should* the university be doing in your community?” the initial responses suggested many members of the public do not expect a close relationship between public universities and residents of the state-at-large. Most people would pause for some time, give a look that suggested they did not know what I was asking, and then ask for clarification. Such responses suggest that they do not readily think of UW-Madison as a resource for all of the people of the state, or as an institution that could be more engaged with the people of the state.

Nevertheless, when I explained some of the ways in which the university is engaged with communities around the state, people offered many ideas. The more general suggestions included “help with jobs” or “help with our brain drain” (the common occurrence of their local youth attending UW-Madison, and then choosing to live in a community other than that hometown). They asked for job-related training online or in their community, as opposed to on-campus training, and often suggested specific areas of research such as research on biofuels, water quality, and invasive species. They wished for more recruitment of their students, and at younger ages (middle school as opposed to high school). Also, they also suggested that the university improve its public relations, since the people I often talked with were often surprised that UW-Madison was already pursuing many of the initiatives they suggested.

Sometimes the suggestions were very specific, and administrators and I were able to link them with people on campus who could meet their needs.^{vii} For example, one

woman in northern Wisconsin wished to organize a symposium on tissue donation that would feature speakers from the UW-Madison medical school. One group organized through a Baptist church in Milwaukee wanted to obtain training on HIV/AIDS awareness through the nursing school.

Making Sense of These Responses in Context

The foregoing describes the responses people gave to three key questions about a flagship university in a state's public higher education system. Considering the answers collectively, and in the context of the whole conversations and the communities in which they met, suggests a pervasive sentiment with which people regarded that university: distance. Despite scholars' increased focus on the civic engagement of institutions of higher education with the public, many residents of Wisconsin perceived that their state's flagship university was inattentive and inaccessible. Public opinion surveys suggest that disconnection from institutions of higher education is a common sentiment. For example, a December 23-28, 2008, Public Agenda poll of 1,009 U.S. adults found that 55% of the public perceives that "Colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line," as opposed to "colleges today mainly care about education and making sure students have a good educational experience."^{viii} Also, a February 13-25, 2007, poll by the same organization found that 30% "strongly agree" and 28% "somewhat agree" that "colleges could take a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices." And with respect to public higher education institutions in particular, that same poll found that 48% believed that "Your state's public college and university system needs to be

fundamentally overhauled” came closer to their own view than “your state’s public college system should be basically left alone” (39%).

The remarkable thing about this sense of distance from higher education is that it is not exclusively directed toward institutions of higher education. In the conversations across Wisconsin, people talked in this manner about a range of institutions that had authority over their lives. Typically, the same groups that talked about the state flagship university as inaccessible and inattentive to their interests spoke about HMOs, doctors, and public officials of all levels of government as similarly unconcerned with the needs of people like themselves. For example, during my first visit to a group of men who met every morning in a diner in a suburban Milwaukee town, the conversation started out with the group explaining the changes that had taken place in their town. They criticized the way local leaders had spent a great deal of money revamping the downtown area.

Lew: We had a perfectly good road here and 20 years ago they dug it all up and put it in. It needed to be 4 lanes and everything now they’ve dug it all up and turned it back into 2 lanes and put all these goofy planters in and all this stuff. What does that do for us economically? Not a damn thing.

KCW: You don’t think it’s done much? Yeah? It sure looks different [than before the redevelopment]. [...] ^{ix}

Skip: Just ridiculous. We’re talking-- this was millions [of dollars].

Lew: But they complain about parking down here and all of a sudden when they did all this stuff they took away 25 parking spaces, you know, and they complain that they need more parking! This poor guy whose got the liquor

store over here and the dentist who has been there forever--his people [customers] got no place to park!

They spoke about local leaders as spending taxpayers' money in ways that reflected little understanding of or concern for their needs. They spoke about decision makers in the health care industry in the same way. When I asked what their concerns were with health care, they responded:

Skip: There again, health care, to me it looks like a case of somebody is looking for profit.

Lew: We are faced with all these high health care prices. You go to any doctor's office and you look at what they're building for hospitals. I mean they are Taj Mahals. I don't need a Taj Mahal because when I am sick I could care less what the hell the decorating is like.

George: Same with schools. They are building all these Taj Mahals as schools and the facilities don't matter!

Lew: I mean I am sorry. If this stuff is supposed to be regulated in some way, shape, or form, why do we have to have all the fancy marble and all this stuff to make me feel better? No. When it is all coming out of my pocket and what not, forget it.

When we started talking about the UW-Madison, they used a similar lens that suggested decision-makers are wasteful of taxpayers' money and inconsiderate of their concerns. When I asked, "What do you think the UW-Madison does well currently, if anything?" George responded,

I don't know what they do well, I've just got complaints about things that I see happening...[one man interrupts to talk about how his daughter had a good experience at the UW-Madison, despite what he saw as the pervasive liberal leanings of the campus]...I wish there were some way we could get rid of the tenure system that they have at the university. There is far too many professors that they rely on their student aids to do their work. They do absolutely nothing and we're paying their big salaries and then you hear of the corruption that goes on with some of the sexual things and what not and we can't even get rid of 'em because they are tenured in...I mean the sacred cow thing that we have with the tenure system has gotta be overhauled. Everybody should have to live—with money being so tight, why can't they-- Like in the private sector, if I pissed my boss off, I would be gone today. [Laughs.] You should have to-- just because I been here for 10 years think that we owe you a living? And some of the living that they think that we owe them is just astronomical. Today's with money being tight and everything, why do we owe anybody anything?

Lew: Just was a scandal on that—some of these guys had been on the job for a year, big salaries. See my daughter went through that too—some of her teacher aids that were taking over her classes-- she would come home and complain about it. What I told her—a little bit of it is part of the learning process. Try and understand 'em.

Because the conversation had turned to weaknesses of the institution, I asked,

KCW: What doesn't the UW do so well these days?

Skip: I mean, I'm kinda far removed from that, I mean I have my – my kids aren't at the point where they are going to be going to school and I am well passed it but I know that when I went to it – was a UW system school – I considered to be a very affordable alternative. And I don't know that it necessarily is anymore.

Lew: One thing that having a lot of nieces and nephews who have gone through the UW system – one of the biggest problems I see with it is that you know these kids start out wanting to get this or that say a teaching degree they go through all this stuff and all of a sudden because of again some professor decides they don't want to do this class at this particular time or whatever, instead of getting their degree in four years they are all going 4 and half or 5 years, causing additional hardship on them when there was really no reason for them. When they started this program, "Yeah, 4 years you can do this." Well all of a sudden because the university changes their mind or a professor doesn't feel like teaching this class at a certain time, I mean you know there it is again, because he is a sacred cow or whatever they don't feel they have to do what they want, what they have to do when they want to do it. You know, if I should—if the university gives these kids a package of saying in 4 years you're going to get this degree, and all of a sudden for some reason the university changes their mind, I think the university should have to pick up the tab for the extra time these kids should have to spend there.... but I mean they are real eager to penalize the students by charging them extra. I think they gotta be accountable and

somehow if they're told when they've signed on as freshman that these are the classes you're going to take and all of a sudden that gets changed the university should have to pony up for some of this money. Make 'em responsible.

The words “responsible” and “accountable” are important indicators here. The complaints in these conversations, whether about higher education, the government, or health care, were each about a perception of a lack of accountability. To reiterate, this concern with accountability was not restricted to UW-Madison.

I use the conversations of this one group to illustrate. They were typical of the lenses through which groups talked about UW-Madison across all types of communities I visited. However, the perspective of having no say in important policy decision-making and no mechanisms of accountability in higher education and other public institutions was most apparent in rural areas.

[Just a note for readers unfamiliar with the geography in Wisconsin: In this state, there are two major urban centers, Madison and Milwaukee, both located near the southern border of the state (with Illinois). The state capitol and the flagship university are both located in Madison. People across the state commonly contrasted these metropolitan areas against “outstate” Wisconsin, or the rest of Wisconsin.]

In general, people across the state perceived that power was unequally distributed geographically. When using the term “Madison,” people were commonly referring simultaneously to the state government as well as to the university. The typical perception of resource distribution in the state was that “Madison sucks in all our resources, sends them to Milwaukee, and we [in outstate Wisconsin] never see them

again.” The perception of a distance from power was about decision-making as well resources. Many people claimed that power emanated out from Madison, but never in the reverse direction. Especially in rural communities, people said that public officials in Madison did not spend time in and did not listen to the concerns of people living in their community.^x Simply put, outstate Wisconsinites felt ignored by decision makers in Madison.

Much of this geographic divide was perceived not just as Madison/Milwaukee versus outstate, but as urban vs. rural. Many people remarked something similar to “people in Madison don’t understand the rural way of life.” Also, they perceived that Madison, one of the Democratic strongholds in the state, was far more liberal than the rest of Wisconsin, and believed that decision makers in the capitol city made choices that did not reflect the values of the rest of the state.

The views expressed by the members of a group of men who met in a small logging community in west central Wisconsin were typical of these sentiments. Every morning at 6:30am, a group of men on their way to work and male retirees meet in the back of a local restaurant to drink coffee, play several rounds of dice, and catch up on the news of the day. On my third visit to the group, several members asked me if I was going to a horse auction being held in town that day.

KCW: I think I will go up once, yeah, I went up I looked through the fence
yesterday evening.

Henry: Why don’t you buy one of them horses? I got a trailer.

KCW: Not sure where I’d keep him.

Henry: Hunh?

KCW: I'm not sure where I'd keep him!

Henry: Keep him in Madison. That's where they keep all the bullshit.

[Laughter]

Henry: Well basically all you gotta do is buy the front end of the horse, they got the back end in Madison!

During that visit, they invited me to shake dice with them. I balanced my need to be an impartial researcher with my desire to blend in with the group, and erred on the side of gambling. Unfortunately, I started to win—repeatedly. Most of the members of the group thought this was funny, but at least one was visibly irritated. To try to soften the situation, I joked,

KCW: I come and ask for your thoughts and I take your money!

Richard: I'll tell you what, that's good though. Because we have so little of it.

KCW: And it all goes to Madison anyway [joking along with them].

Howard: We expect nothing less from Madison!

Richard: It won't cost any postage to get it down there now!

These sentiments that Madison took their resources and ignored their concerns was not reserved for the university, but definitely colored their views of undergraduate education and also research. With respect to education, groups in many communities claimed that recruiters spent no time in their towns.^{xi} Also, many felt that students from smaller towns would have a difficult time attending college in the distant, urban realm of Madison, at such a large university. Such perceptions ran against the grain of evidence that students from rural communities who apply to the UW-Madison are accepted and also have similar levels of success in their first years as students from more urban areas

of the state (Huhn, 2005). Nevertheless, views that university officials were not particularly concerned with residents in rural areas of the state fed perceptions of distance, which may, in turn, have minimized direct contact with the institution by reducing the chances that local residents apply for admission.^{xii}

The sense of disconnection among rural residents also showed up in comments about research. People in some communities had noticed researchers from the UW-Madison conducting studies in their area of the state, especially on issues related to agriculture and the natural sciences. While the residents conveyed widespread respect for the caliber of research conducted, several groups said that they wished the researchers who were in their communities had made more of a connection to local people. In some cases, people claimed that UW-Madison researchers disrespected local communities by acting as though they were above the law. For example, one man, who visited with a group of male local leaders every morning in the town hall in a northern, tourist area told the following story:

Male resident: Their image is tarnished because there are many lakes up here that are electric motors only and posted-- prominently posted at the landing. Two years ago I was up here at my lake, a little lake, it was daylight, all state land. Absolutely gorgeous lake, electric motors only... And here comes the University of Wisconsin one day with 4 young people in a boat with an outboard motor and they're going down the lake wide open and I hollered at them, waved and they shut the motor off and I said, "What're you doing?" "Well, I work for the University of Wisconsin. We're out here doing research on..." – They're going to take core samples out in the

deep part of the lake. And I said “Well, did you see the sign at the landing? There’s no electric, no gas motors.” “Well yeah, but we’re from” I said, “I don’t care if you’re from Washington D.C.!” Started the motor and away they went. And came back by me again and kind of waved at me like you know ha ha ha we can run our motor, you can’t. I got home that night and I was fuming.

KCW: I don’t blame you.

Male resident: And uh I mean it’s a lake that loons are there, people kayak just to see the, you know, I called the local game warden. And he says, “I can’t do a thing about it we have word from the town, hands off, we cannot do anything, whatever they do we can’t do anything about.” I says [sarcastically], “Well that’s great.”

In other cases, outstate residents resented university employees who did not communicate with residents when conducting research in their community. They wanted to know more about the purpose of research projects, but they also wanted researchers to consult them and acknowledge that knowledge garnered in practice as opposed to in the academy was beneficial.

For example, one man in a morning coffee klatch in a northern town told a story about researchers constructing a set of elaborate and expensive cribs for fish to spawn around in a remote lake that he regularly fishes on.

I went looking along and they had, there were bass spawning and there was a little peg in the ground with a little red flag with a number on it. I seen these all over the lake. Well they were there one day when I was

fishing and I said, “What’s with the red flags?” and [they] said, “Oh we’re trying to determine if bass spawn in the same place every year.” And I said, “Well if you’d have asked anybody who lives up here they could’ve tell ya ‘yes’ and just save yourself a whole bunch of trouble.” [Laughs.] They don’t want anything to do with ya. They think they’re smarter than ya. Got that book learning.

This man was clearly resentful of the lack of respect that university researchers showed for the knowledge that he and other local residents had about their own community. In his view, even though university employees had traveled off of the campus into outstate Wisconsin, they had done little to build relationships with local residents.

The general argument here is that a wide variety of people in Wisconsin made sense of UW-Madison through the lens of distance: they perceived it was an excellent university, but was mainly inattentive to the concerns and needs of people like themselves. More importantly, this lens was not used exclusively for understanding higher education; people used it to talk about a wide range of institutions in society.

There are several ways in which this argument should be qualified, however. First, an important variation seemed to exist across people of different income levels, inferred from their stated occupations. That is, people who were professionals such as lawyers and doctors were more likely to talk about authority figures in higher education, government, the media, and health care with a sense that these actors were inattentive to their concerns, but for different reasons other than those implied by lower income people. Lower income people in the sample conveyed a sense of powerlessness and lack of

efficacy. They perceived that authority figures would not listen to their concerns, even if they took the time to communicate them. However, higher income people disagreed with the policies of current power-holders, but they often mentioned direct connections to those decision-makers, and suggested that they could themselves hold those positions if they had the desire to pursue them.

Another important qualification is that although people expressed a disconnect from leaders in a range of institutions, they were often less critical of higher education decision makers than they were of other leaders. This is consistent with national level public opinion survey data that shows less than a majority of the public—40%—has a “great deal” of confidence in “people in charge of running major educational institutions, such as colleges and universities” but even smaller percentages have confidence in “people in charge of running...”: “major companies” (11%), “Congress” (9%), “the courts and justice system” (19%), “law firms” (11%), “the press” (12%), “organized religion” (28%), “public schools” (25%), “the U.S. Supreme Court” (30%), “television news” (22%), “organized labor” (16%), “Wall Street” (4%). The only institutions that fare better than higher education are “small business” (48%) and “the military” (58%).^{xiii}

Conclusion

This study has examined the manner in which people in Wisconsin make sense of UW-Madison. It has done so by listening to conversations among people in a variety of communities throughout the state, in groups that meet regularly of their own accord. The result is a picture of people respecting their state’s university, but making sense of it

through the lens of distance. They spoke about the institution in a similar manner that they used to discuss other institutions that govern their lives.

One alternative reading to these conversations is that the perceptions of the university are driven by political ideology. One might argue that the content of these conversations can be explained by the simple fact that most of these groups leaned conservative (which their stated political preferences indicate). However, such an observation does not negate the argument here. Even the more liberal-leaning groups in this sample emphasized a lack of accountability among people on campus. They were, however, less likely than more conservative people to attribute this lack of accountability to the liberal leanings of faculty and administrators.

This concern underscores ways in which those wishing to draw conclusions about the shape of public opinion toward higher education in general should read the results with some caution. First, this is a study of perceptions toward one institution, and therefore care should be used when generalizing to other universities or colleges. Second, the people examined in this study are not a cross-section of the residents of Wisconsin, much less the nation.

Nevertheless, the ubiquity of some of the views expressed here, across groups composed of a wide variety of people, meeting in a wide array of communities, suggests that these sentiments are common across a wider population. In addition, the people included in the study were often opinion leaders in their communities, and thus their perspectives are all the more important to consider.

However, the point of this study has not been to describe the preferences of a broad population, but rather to understand how people make sense of UW-Madison, and

to pay special attention to local context while doing so. Context, particularly rural vs. urban settings, proved important to the understandings expressed in these groups. However, the main result was remarkable in the extent to which it appeared *across* contexts: A wide variety of groups made sense of the UW-Madison through the same lens of distance that they used to understand their place with respect to power in general.

The main implication is that the future of relationships between UW-Madison and the broader public will depend on listening. This study suggests that a major impediment to university-public relations is the perception that this institution of higher education (the UW-Madison) is typical of institutions of authority: it turns a deaf ear on the public and is not actually concerned with what the public wants.

To overcome this perception, perhaps we need to conduct business in ways that other major institutions do not. Rather than market to the public, as corporations, HMOs, and arguably governments currently do, UW-Madison might benefit most from attempting to genuinely communicate concern through building interpersonal relationships.

For example, when attempting to uncover the “larger sense of purpose” that institutions of higher education in general should pursue in the future (Shapiro, 2005), the definition of this purpose should be achieved through something more than introspection within our campus community. Dictating to the public at large the relevance of UW-Madison from within the academy will most likely only perpetuate the notion that the people in charge of our university are out of touch with the average member of the public.

In addition, the results of this study suggest that remedying the perception that UW-Madison ignores the public's concerns can not simply be achieved with more communication. It is a *different type* of communication that is required. Inviting state residents to come to campus more often ignores the lack of resources many people have for doing so as well as their perception that the institution lacks relevance to their specific community. Also, sponsoring town hall meetings in their community will not build stronger relationships with the public, because those who are the most disconnected from the institution are least likely to attend. Even more damaging, the standard physical set-up and agenda of such meetings perpetuates the imbalance of power between university employees and members of the public. With a dais or lectern at the front, and chairs arrayed for the audience to fill, it is clear whom the conveners consider the experts, and whom the listeners.

My investigations suggest that we need to instead do more listening. We need to meet people in their own communities, in the course of their daily lives. This may mean dropping in on dice games, pulling up our boats alongside people fishing on local lakes, or sitting in the stands at high school sporting events. In other words, connecting with members of the public in the future will require listening to the public in creative ways. Online resources may prove useful, especially with members of younger generations, but the time-honored practice of neighborly chats will need to be renewed as well.

The lost art of listening may also be a key to ensuring a future for land grant universities in particular. Many accuse such universities, historically charged with serving the public good, as having lost sight of this mission (Alperovitz et al., 2008; Kellogg Commission, 2000). The part of the mission that is still highly valued by the

public that I studied is the extension service. In many communities, especially rural communities, when I asked what the UW-Madison does well, people would say “Extension.” When I probed further, asking what it was about extension that they valued, people told stories about their regular interactions with extension employees who were willing to share their knowledge. They knew the extension faculty and staff by name, and considered them university members at the same time that they regarded them as members of their own community. Those relationships do not arise from polling members of the public or even from inviting them to campus, but from immersion in the residents’ community. The implication is that if land-grant universities wish to continue to serve the public, the public perceives that extension services provide a model that should be strengthened and continued.

The mode of public opinion study suggested here is not just useful for gauging public opinion, but for disseminating information and demonstrating concern and respect for local communities. Numerous times during my fieldwork people would comment that “you’re the first faculty member from UW- Madison I’ve ever met.” Investigating public opinion in the manner used in this study enables the researcher to correct misperceptions and inform members of the public about services and research their institution is providing. Often during my investigations people suggested that the UW-Madison conduct research or provide a type of service that we were already conducting, and of which they were unaware. Listening to the public by meeting with them on their own turf enables an ambassador of a college or university to gather valuable information and is also a clear demonstration of listening, a characteristic that people attempting to engage with universities clearly value (Weerts & Sandman 2008, p. 93, 97).

If one defines service to the public as the scholarship of engagement, the extent of alienation from the university revealed in this study suggests that public institutions of higher education need to not only examine the nature of partnerships with organizations (Weerts & Sandman, 2008), but also with residents of the states with whom they are theoretically in partnership with. Support from our state legislature is fostered by support from members of the public. To ensure continued public fiscal support, we need to do more to understand how the public perceives us. Campus leaders may believe they understand the public's policy preferences with respect to their institution (e.g., support for tuition increases, support for admissions policies), but without listening more closely, they might miss concerns they did not anticipate. More importantly, they might misconstrue the manner in which people understand these policies. It will be hard to reform policies as well as promote them in a way that successfully obtains public support without understanding both the preferences *and* the perspectives of state residents.

Caution should be used, however, in reading these results as an argument for listening in order to package higher education policies more effectively. Several scholars have argued that true civic engagement of colleges and universities is more than reaching out to the public in order to foster support. In the spirit of John Dewey, they argue that the engagement of higher education ought to be transformative, consisting of collaboration with members of the public to collectively bring about a more participatory democracy (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett 2007; Mathews 2005). The practice of service learning also suggests that the engagement of higher education ought to be transactional. Students, faculty, and campus staff can learn from members of the public while they engage in serving them.

Without doing more listening, we run the risk of imposing our academia-grown perspectives on our perceptions of the public will. That is, even if we conduct surveys of the public, unless we travel off campus, place ourselves in the environment in which Wisconsinites live their lives, and let them tell us in their own words what they value and what they wish for, we may not sufficiently hear what it is that they have to say. Whether one adopts a delegate or trustee model of the representation of the public that universities serve, such knowledge seems basic.

ⁱ These were not focus groups or “listening sessions,” since they were not groups convened by a researcher. The members gathered of their own accord. Also, this method is different from participant observation, in that I did ask to steer the conversation, rather than observe the flow of talk as it occurred without my intentional intervention.

ⁱⁱ The protocol was designed to serve three purposes: investigate perceptions of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, develop content for the statewide UW Survey Center Badger Poll (citation suppressed), and investigate the connection between political preferences and economic interests (citation suppressed). (Please see Appendix B for protocols).

ⁱⁱⁱ These methods of drawing conclusions are akin to the methods of “counting” and “noting relations between variables” detailed in Miles & Huberman (1994, chap. 10).

^{iv} See Miles & Huberman 1994, pp. 262-277 for these tactics for verifying conclusions.

^v A February 2007 Public Agenda poll found that 30% “strongly agree,” 28% “somewhat agree,” while 20% “somewhat disagree,” and 16% “strongly disagree” (6% don’t know) in response to “Do you agree or disagree that colleges could take a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices?” (Polling the Nations online database).

^{vi} The full wording was, “How much do you worry about each of the following? Do you worry a lot, some, not much, or not at all about having enough money to send your children to college?” 6% said “not much,” 20% said “not at all,” and 25% volunteered the response that the question did not apply to them. Another example: A December 2008 Public Agenda poll found that 67% “strongly agree,” 19% “somewhat agree,” and only 7% “somewhat disagree,” and 2% “strongly disagree” (5% don’t know) that “Students have to pay too much money to pay for their college education” (Polling the Nations online database).

^{vii} [Statement of gratitude suppressed].

^{viii} Enrollment levels suggest that a sizeable segment of the public perceives that for-profit higher education institutions are more efficient and more attentive to needs of the public (see Coleman & Vedder, 2008).

^{ix} Several comments deleted in the interests of space.

^x Residents often classify their community in ways that contradict analyst's classifications. An October 2008 Badger Poll included a subjective measure of residency in a rural area and revealed that respondents' classifications were consistent with standard Survey Sampling International classifications 58% of the time. Because this study focused on perceptions, I classified a community as rural if the members of the group I spoke with viewed it as such. According to the U.S. Census, 31.7% of Wisconsin's population lived in rural areas in 2000.

^{xi} I use the term "town" to refer generally here to smaller municipalities and unincorporated areas.

^{xii} Students from rural high schools are in fact less likely to apply to UW-Madison than students from urban high schools (Huhn, 2005).

^{xiii} A February 10-15, 2009, Harris Poll, asked 1,010 U.S. adults, "As far as people in charge of running major educational institutions, such as colleges and universities are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?" This same format was used to ask about the other institutions. The public had a statistically indistinguishable level of a "great deal" of confidence in people in charge of running "medicine" (34%) and "the White House" (36%) (Polling the Nations online database).

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Appendix A: Descriptions of Groups Observed and Municipalities In Which They Met

Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
Central hamlet	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (men)	500	38000
Northern tourist location	Weekly morning breakfast group, local restaurant (women, primarily retired)	500	32,000
North western hamlet	Weekly morning coffee klatch, local church (mixed gender, primarily retirees)	500	35,000
North central village	Group of library volunteers at local library (mixed gender, retirees); also, daily coffee klatch of male local leaders meeting in the local municipal building	500	34,000
North eastern resort village	Group of congregants after a Saturday evening service at a Lutheran church (mixed gender)	1,000	41,000
North western village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (men)	1,000	32,000
Northern American Indian reservation	Group of family members, during a Friday fish fry at a local gas station/restaurant (mixed gender)	1,000	35,000
South central village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (mixed gender, working and retired)	1,500	31,000
North central village	Daily morning breakfast group, local diner (men)	2,000	38,000
South central village	Women's weekly morning coffee klatch at local diner; also group of male professionals, construction workers, retirees meeting later there	3,000	43,000
Central west village	Two daily morning coffee klatches, one at a local gas station, the other at a local diner (men)	3,000	30,000
Central east village	Kiwanis meeting (mixed gender, primarily retirees); also daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at local fast food restaurant	3,000	45,000
Suburb of a city located in adjacent state	Daily morning coffee klatch, local diner (male local business owners, lawyers, retirees)	9,000	51,000
Southeastern city on northern edge of one of the two main metropolitan areas	Daily morning coffee klatch, local diner (men)	10,000	54,000
South central city	Middle-aged man and woman taking a mid-morning break at a local café	10,000	36,000
Central city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local café (middle-aged professionals, mixed gender)	38,000	37,000

Table is continued on next page.

Appendix A, continued

Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2000)	Median Household Income (1999)
East central city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (retired men)	42,000	41,000
Suburb of one of the two main cities	Group of teachers and administrators at local high school (mixed gender); Daily lunch group of middle-aged men; Mixed gender breakfast group of retirees	47,000	55,000
Western city	Daily morning coffee klatch, local café (middle-aged professionals, retirees, mixed gender)	52,000	31,000
South eastern city	Weekly morning breakfast group, local diner (mixed gender, retirees and currently employed)	82,000	37,000
North eastern city	Daily morning breakfast group, local diner (men)	100,000	39,000
Madison	Middle-aged, female professionals' book club; also, daily morning coffee klatch of male retirees at bakery; female resident volunteers in food pantry in low income neighborhood	200,000	42,000
Milwaukee, northern neighborhood	AIDS/HIV activism group meeting after services in a Baptist church (mixed gender)	600,000	32,000
Milwaukee, southern neighborhood	Group of Mexican immigrants, waiting at a pro bono health clinic (mixed gender)	600,000	32,000
South western village	4H group (mixed gender)	4,000	42,000
Central village	4H group (mixed gender)	10,000	33,000
South eastern city	4H group (mixed gender)	28,000	48,000
Central east village	4H group (mixed gender)	4,000	38,000

Note: Population and income figures have been rounded to preserve anonymity of groups observed.

APPENDIX B: LISTENING INVESTIGATIONS PROTOCOL

INITIAL VISIT PROTOCOL

[intro and consent]

Most important issues:

What do you think are the major issues facing people in [name of municipality] these days?
Which of these issues are of special concern to you all personally?

[If issues include taxes, health care, or immigration, skip to relevant questions below.]

What do you think should be done about this?

Why do you think this has been overlooked?

Whom does the current policy benefit?

Taxes [if not addressed above]:

With respect to property and income taxes, do you think people similar to yourself currently pay a fair share?

Whom do you think benefits from our current tax policies?

Health care [if not addressed above]:

Now I would like to talk about health care for a few moments. Do you feel that you have been able to obtain adequate health care for you and your families?

Are there people in your community who don't/do have adequate health care? Why do you think that is the case?

Immigration [if not addressed above]:

Is immigration an issue in this community? How does it affect you? How do you think immigration is affecting life in Wisconsin in general?

Self-description (identity and occupation):

How would you describe the kind of people that are a part of your group, to outsiders like me?

Do any of you work outside the home? What kind of work do you do?

Children, activities, and education:

Do you have children? How old are they?

What kinds of activities are they involved in after school?

For those of you with kids still in school, do you think they will go on to obtain some kind of post-high school education?

Would you want them to attend the UW-Madison? Why/why not?

Did any of you attend school after high school? Did any of you attend the UW-Madison, or another UW-system school? [If the latter:] Which one?

University of Wisconsin-Madison:

What, in your opinion, does UW-Madison currently do well?

What, in your opinion, can UW-Madison do better?

What *should* UW-Madison be doing in your community?

Whom do you think the University of Wisconsin-Madison currently benefits?

When you think about the students who attend UW-Madison, and the faculty and staff who work there, what comes to mind?

Financial security:

Thinking about your overall situation here in [name of municipality], would you say that you struggle to make ends meet, or do you live comfortably?

Success and deservingness:

In America today, some people have BETTER JOBS and HIGHER INCOMES than others do. WHY do you think that is — that some Americans have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?

[Here are some reasons other folks have stated—how important do you think these reasons are?

'Because some people have more in-born ability to learn.'

'Because discrimination holds some people back.'

'Because some people don't get a chance to get a good education.'

'Because some people just choose low-paying jobs.'

'Because government policies have helped high-income workers more.'

'Because God made people different from one another.'

'Because some people just don't work as hard.'

What does the term “hard work” mean to you?

I'm going to give you a list of occupations. Tell me which of these folks work hard for a living, and why you think that's the case: lawyers, construction workers, waitresses, public school teachers.

Anything else you want to add?

May I come back sometime?

SECOND VISIT PROTOCOL

During my last round of visits with groups like this around the state, I found that many people were concerned about health care, higher education, and issues related to water. I would like to ask more about your thoughts on these topics.

Health care:

What ARE your concerns about health care?

Do you think people here in your community are better or worse off with respect to health care than people in other parts of the state? Why? The country? Why?

In our last Badger Poll, we asked people which of four health care reform solutions they support. Let me describe these and then ask for your opinions . [Describe four alternatives, based on following question wording.]

A number of proposals have been made about ways to change the health care system in the State of Wisconsin. I am going to read some of these proposals and for each please tell me whether you strongly oppose it, somewhat oppose it, somewhat favor it, or strongly favor it.

[In the Badger Poll, the four questions below were randomized]

A. What about consolidating all the money and resources now being spent by employers, individuals, the state government, and insurance companies to operate the current health insurance system and replace it with a new system, administered entirely by state government and covering all residents of Wisconsin?

B. How about expanding the eligibility of existing state government health insurance programs for low-income people, such as BadgerCare, Medicaid, and Healthy Families, to provide coverage for more people without health insurance?

C. What about requiring every resident of Wisconsin to have health insurance, either from their employer or another source, and offer government subsidies to low-income residents to help them pay for it?

D. How about encouraging individuals to put money into a tax-free health savings account that they would use to pay for their regular health care bills and accompany this with a catastrophic insurance plan they must also purchase to help pay for major medical bills?

Higher education:

In what ways is higher education a big issue for people here in your community?

Is higher education more of a pressing concern for people here than in other parts of the state?

In general, whom do you think the UW-Madison benefits? Whom do you think higher education in general benefits in this country?

Do you have children? Do/did you want your kids to go to college? Why/ why not?

Water:

Taking care of [name issue related to water mentioned in previous visit] will likely require broad support in the state legislature. Do you think it's possible to get that support? Why/ why not?

Is this an issue that all Wisconsinites should be concerned about? How would you sell that to the broader Wisconsin public?

Presidential race:

Which of the candidates would be most attentive to the concerns of people here in your community. Why? Most attentive to concerns of people in Wisconsin? Why?

What are your hopes for this presidential race?

Higher education:

[Repeat questions from first round]

Social class identity:

People talk about social classes such as the poor, the working class, the middle class, the upper-middle class, and the upper class. Which of these classes would you say you belong to?

THIRD AND ADDITIONAL VISITS PROTOCOL

Poll agenda:

What are the major issues facing people in this community?

What do you think should be done about this?

Why do you think this has been overlooked?

Whom does the current policy benefit?

Power and authority:

- How would you describe your group to an outsider like me? How do you think you compare to the rest of the community?
- Who do you think has power in your community? In the state? The nation?
- Do you tend to feel or not feel that most people with power try to take advantage of people like yourself?
- How has this community changed over time?

Political parties:

Which party do you feel is more attentive to the concerns of people like you. Why?

Is it fair to say that Republicans are for the rich, and Democrats are for the lower income?

Which party do you trust to handle the economy? Why?

Attitudes toward government:

How much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do -- a good deal, some, or not much?"

Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?

[Agree/disagree:] People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

[Agree/disagree:] Public officials don't care much what people like me think.

News use:

Over the past seven days, which of the following have you used to obtain news?

- A) Read a newspaper
- B) Read magazines like Newsweek, Time, or U.S. News and World Report
- C) Watched the national news on television
- D) Watched the local news on television
- E) Listened to the news on radio
- F) Read news on the Internet

Higher education:

[Repeat questions from first round]

Where do you usually get your news about the UW?