

WILLIAM J. CRONON
Frederick Jackson Turner
& Vilas Research Professor
of History, Geography, &
Environmental Studies

February 24, 2011



DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

5103 Humanities Building
455 North Park Street
Madison, WI 53706
(608)265-6023
Fax: (608)263-5302
EMail: wcronon@wisc.edu
Web: www.williamcronon.net

Office of the Board of Regents
1860 Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Dr.
Madison, WI 53706

Dear Colleagues:

The UW Board of Regents has called a special listening session on Friday, February 25, to hear commentary regarding proposals for the "New Badger Partnership" that UW-Madison Chancellor Biddy Martin has been promoting for much of the past year. From the rumors now swirling through our community, I fear this may prove to be an ugly meeting that could easily do grievous harm to UW-Madison--and thereby to the UW System and to the State of Wisconsin itself. Alas, emotions seem to be running so high that this damage may be done (and done, tragically and ironically, by people who cherish these institutions as much as I do) whether or not UW-Madison maintains its current relationships with the rest of UW System.

I'm writing to express the hope that we will all do everything in our power to prevent that from happening--no matter what changes we may contemplate in existing administrative relationships among these institutions. I say this as an alumnus and faculty member at UW-Madison--and as an enormous fan of the other UW schools, of UW Extension, and of the Wisconsin Idea which they all embody.

As you all surely know, the Chancellor's overarching goal has always been to secure the most favorable possible foundations for sustaining and enhancing the excellence of Wisconsin's greatest research university as we navigate the changing circumstances of higher education in the twenty-first century. That is what you hired her to do. Although I am second to none in my admiration for other schools in the UW System, and although I am no less passionate about defending them than I am about defending my alma mater, I don't think any of us should pretend that the challenges facing UW-Madison--given its far greater scale, complexity, intricate funding streams, myriad missions and mandates, and international stature--aren't of a different order of magnitude than those of the other schools and even of System itself.

Anyone who pretends this isn't true hasn't thought hard enough about the ongoing miracle that Wisconsin--a state never more than middling in its population and wealth--has somehow, astonishingly and against all odds, managed to sustain one of the greatest public research universities in the world.

This remarkable achievement is perennially at risk, and the challenges of sustaining it have never been greater.

Whatever Biddy Martin has done or said has sought unswervingly to meet these challenges. We may argue with each other about some of the ways she has done this, or some of the means she has chosen for doing so. But I hope none of us will doubt the commitment and focus and vision she has brought to the crucial task at hand.

I hope her critics won't lose track of this fact. We need to keep our eyes on the prize. The stakes are too high to do anything else.

As we face formidable competition from better-funded private institutions here in the United States and ambitious new universities in other parts of the world; as the relative share of financial support from the State of Wisconsin continues its decades-long decline; as we grapple with ever-greater challenges in recruiting the best faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students from Wisconsin, the United States, and the rest of the world; as we strive to maintain and improve access so that talented students from all family backgrounds will be able to thrive on our campus; as we meet the expensive and demanding challenges of a digital revolution that is changing literally everything about the way research universities function; as we work to maintain our longstanding commitment to the people of this state and to the "Wisconsin Idea" which expects universities to be actively engaged in addressing the problems of the state and the wider world ... as we struggle to meet these and many other enormous challenges, we need the strongest possible executive leadership at the helm of our institutional ship.

We have that leadership in Chancellor Biddy Martin. I hope we will not be so foolish as to undermine her authority or weaken her ability to lead this great university at a time when strong leadership has never been more needed.

The waters we are now sailing (and that Biddy Martin has sought as best she can to navigate) could not be more treacherous. A newly elected governor with majority control of both houses of the legislature is responding to economic crisis with drastic cuts in state spending that will leave no community, no government agency, and no part of the Wisconsin economy untouched -- while also seeking equally drastic changes in longstanding laws and institutional relationships that are producing a firestorm of political protest that this state has not seen for half a century. A Board of Regents appointed entirely by a different governor from what is now the minority party brings to its work very different assumptions about how best to protect the UW System as a whole. The leadership of UW System is seeking defend the many universities, colleges, and extension programs that are among the most important cultural institutions of this state. And the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison is trying protect the largest and most financially complicated of these institutions by pursuing the best accommodations she can as she works with the Regents and System leadership on the one hand, and the Governor and legislature on the other, to sustain a research university whose excellence and world renown can never be regained if Wisconsin permits it to become irreparably wounded at this very challenging moment.

We can disagree about particulars of the Badger Partnership. We can debate with each other whether a public authority is the best possible institutional structure to give UW-Madison the flexibility and autonomy it needs to flourish in the more competitive world of the twenty-first century. We can try to rethink the best possible strategies for maintaining the excellence of higher education in Wisconsin, which may or may not be optimally served by administrative arrangements that are now nearly forty years old. Our ultimate fiduciary responsibility is *not* to System as it currently exists, but to the underlying mission and goals for which these institutions were created—toward which, I hope, all of us are unswerving in our dedication even if we disagree about particulars. Whatever happens, we can and must work together to make sure that however UW-Madison's institutional structure may change, it will continue to be engaged with, supportive of, and committed to its sister institutions in fulfilling the core values of the Wisconsin Idea.

All of these things we can and should do.

What I desperately hope we will NOT do--whether from anger, or frustration, or personal animus, or ideological disagreement, or opposition to other aspects of what is currently happening in Wisconsin state politics--is undermine the authority and effectiveness of UW-Madison's Chancellor at this extraordinarily dangerous moment.

Let me close by saying why.

I personally believe that Biddy Martin has brought superb leadership skills to UW-Madison. Some have expressed a desire that she practice a more open and visible style of leadership, be more broadly consultative of more members of the campus community, and work harder to involve others in her decision-making processes--and I suspect her leadership would be more effective if she responded constructively to such criticisms. She's not perfect. No one is. But about her vision, her articulateness, her intelligence, her work ethic, her executive and political and personal skills, and her commitment to the core values and lasting excellence of the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a great research university in the service of the Wisconsin Idea ... surely there can be no doubt about any of these.

Even if you don't completely share my high assessment of Chancellor Martin's talents as a leader, I hope you will ask yourself whether this is the moment in Wisconsin history when UW-Madison can afford to be without a strong leader. Frankly, it would be hard for me to imagine a greater disaster, or a more likely recipe for institutional decline toward the mediocrity we all fear. I ask those who may be sharpening their knives and planning to dress down (or, far worse, bring down) Biddy Martin for what she has sought to achieve in the Badger Partnership--no, I *beg* them--to ask themselves whether they honestly believe this university would be better off without her--or better off with her effectiveness substantially diminished by wounds inflicted in a moment of anger.

I think people delude themselves if they think the answer to this question is yes--and it is, alas, a delusion with potentially awful consequences. A rudderless UW-Madison would suffer far more grievously in the months ahead, and I'm not sure it would ever recover from the wounds that could then be inflicted upon it.

I beg my colleagues at Friday's meeting to think very carefully about their own goals if they regard this as a welcome opportunity to put Biddy Martin in her place. Please be very careful what you wish for, for I fear you may regret the unintended consequences of such a wish.

Biddy Martin has been seeking to navigate a nightmarishly difficult situation in an effort to save a great university that has rarely in its history faced more dangerous threats. Without necessarily agreeing with every element of the policy proposals now being debated, I, for one, am deeply grateful for all she has done to think creatively about possible solutions to the multiple crises we face. I hope you'll join me in thanking her for her efforts on our behalf.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Cronon". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

William J. Cronon