

COWS

The Wisconsin Idea in Action

The Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) is a research and policy center dedicated to improving economic performance and living standards in the state of Wisconsin and nationally. Based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with an office in Milwaukee, COWS promotes “high-road” strategies that support living wages, environmental sustainability, strong communities, and public accountability.

COWS prides itself on the “Wisconsin Idea”: the use of University resources — in concert with state government and community, labor, and business leaders — to improve existing social arrangements and policy through bold, informed experiment. Diverse public figures — ranging from longtime Republican Governor Tommy Thompson, to the president of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, to the former head of the business-led Greater Milwaukee Committee — have described COWS as “the Wisconsin Idea in action.”

Chief among our areas of focus is improving job quality. A large and growing number of workers — both in Wisconsin and nationally — are locked into low-paying jobs that offer few benefits, little security, and virtually no opportunities to advance. COWS examines such issues as the rapid rise of the service sector, the obstacles to getting and keeping family-supporting jobs, the challenges of making ends meet on an inadequate income, and high-road approaches — such as unionization — that improve job quality and provide the supports that working families need.

COWS also pays close attention to budget and tax issues. We analyze inequities in Wisconsin’s current tax structure, evaluate public spending priorities, and make recommendations to both increase the state’s revenue base and meet social needs. Together with advocacy groups, COWS pinpoints high-road strategies that will save taxpayers money while bettering our quality of life.

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In addition, COWS supports high-road approaches to community and regional economic growth. With Wisconsin's manufacturing base declining and our once-thriving urban centers now at risk, it is imperative that our state pursue economic development policies associated with high-quality job creation, high productivity, reduced environmental damage, and corporate accountability. COWS works toward this goal by promoting innovative public policies and strategic regional cooperation among business, labor, and government.

In a rapidly changing economy, communities are faced with such problems as high workforce turnover, lack of employee training, and inadequate information about how workers can move into family-supporting jobs. Through a series of innovative policy experiments, COWS has helped bring together employers, unions, community groups, and the public sector to improve workforce training systems, promote workplace modernization, and achieve greater scale and leverage in labor-market reform. These projects — the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, and Jobs With a Future — are creating lasting improvements in jobs, skills, and economic opportunities for people in our state.

Public education is a key element of COWS' work. We distribute research findings, analyze Wisconsin data drawn from national studies, and offer commentary on issues affecting the state. We are cited regularly in the local, state, and national press. Through opinion columns, briefings, and other forums, COWS acts as a resource for public officials, community groups, and ordinary citizens in Wisconsin. These efforts extend to a wide range of organizations and leaders outside the state, including national business and labor groups.

As part of the University of Wisconsin, COWS inherits the University's nonprofit status and is a strictly non-partisan educational and charitable institution. We have a small full-time research and administrative staff, supplemented by research assistants, field organizers, and faculty associates who work on a project basis. COWS researchers have backgrounds in such areas as labor-market analysis, industrial organization, environmental policy, and resource management.

Apart from technical assistance contracts, COWS funding comes mainly from private foundations and state and local government agencies. Recent foundation support has been provided by the Brittingham, Annie E. Casey, Nathan Cummings, Evjue, Ford, Joyce, Rockefeller, and Russell Sage Foundations. Recent technical assistance contracts have covered work for the City of Madison, the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership, and the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin.