



UW's David Wilson takes it to streets

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In conversation, David Wilson uses many of the same buzzwords college administrators across the country are turning to these days.

He speaks about the need to make college "accessible" and "affordable," especially for groups who traditionally haven't pursued a secondary education, and says the University of Wisconsin System's two-year UW Colleges can serve as a "gateway" for students of all backgrounds and ages to pursue a baccalaureate degree. And he talks about the importance of "lifelong learning" and the role UW-Extension plays in helping people from all corners of Wisconsin access university resources.

Behind the jargon, however, is a genuine, lifelong love of learning and devotion to education. Few can better speak to the true power of education than this 54-year-old native of rural Marengo County, Ala., whose family were impoverished black sharecroppers in the segregated South.

"From a relatively young age, I was determined to educate myself and become a big thinker and a possessor of facts," says Wilson, who didn't attend school regularly until seventh grade because he was working in the fields picking cotton and okra. "I figured if I knew the ways of the world, I could escape the harsh conditions I grew up in."

Wilson eventually earned degrees from Tuskegee and Harvard universities, traveled the world and served as Auburn University's first black vice president before becoming chancellor of both the UW Colleges and UW-Extension in May 2006. Today, he oversees a combined budget of more than \$310 million and is focused on helping Wisconsin residents, especially those from inner cities, rural areas and tribal communities, improve their lives through education and continued learning opportunities - a task that has taken on increased importance since the onset of the recession.

This fall, 13,807 students are taking classes at the UW System's 13 two-year colleges, an all-time enrollment high. The 13 schools offer essential curriculum for students preparing to transfer into a bachelor's degree program in virtually any area. UW-Extension, meanwhile, served hundreds of thousands of residents last year, and Wilson says the number of contacts is

climbing in 2009. This arm of the UW System works in partnership with UW campuses, 72 Wisconsin counties, tribal governments and other public and private organizations to connect university research and teaching to the specific needs and interests of residents and communities.

"Extension faculty and staff derive a lot of satisfaction in going into a local community and helping that community reduce the crime rate or helping the farmer produce the milk that is going to be competitive nationally," says Wilson, a divorced, single father of a 13-year-old boy who attends middle school in Middleton. "And then with all the layoffs and the shrinking of the economy, what we're seeing more of in all these communities is people trying to get financial advice and wanting to know how to make nutritious meals without being able to spend so much on groceries. We've seen a real influx of people coming to us."

And unlike some suit-wearing administrators in higher education, Wilson's personal history helps him relate to the very people his institutions are most trying to reach. "I think he's incredibly sincere and I don't think there is any doubt his background helps him connect with people," says Ron Fruit, a radio host, general manager and owner of WRCO in Richland Center, who has interviewed Wilson on the chancellor's visits to UW-Richland. "There is a realness to what he is talking about that people connect with."

Wilson grew up the youngest of 10 children. Like his brothers and sisters, Wilson says he often picked cotton and okra "from sun up 'til sun down."

"My father was illiterate," says Wilson, noting that the laws in Alabama at the time prohibited black children from being formally educated. "So my father lived on property owned by wealthy whites in the area, and we were responsible for harvesting the crops."

The family lived in a two-room "shanty," with no plumbing or electricity. There was a potbelly stove for baking and to provide heat, but the structure had no insulation. During the winter months, the family would mix flour and water, and use the homemade adhesive to plaster pages of discarded Life and Look magazines to the walls to keep out the cold.

Rather than crush his spirit, these tough conditions seemed to fuel Wilson's passion to learn. "As I lay in bed at night, I'd look at these magazine pages," he says. "This helped me learn to read and I developed this insatiable appetite for knowledge. I like to say that little place was more than just a shanty. In a lot of ways it was the elementary school that made up for the days I was not in school, and for the library that did not exist in those schools."

Wilson and his four youngest siblings were allowed to go to school on a rotating basis - three days of school and two days in the field, with the schedule flipping the next week. On the days Wilson did go, he would wake up at 4 a.m. to get ready, and then walk three miles down a trail to the bus stop before riding another dozen miles or so to the school. Despite the trek, Wilson found the energy to pay attention.

"I was just so fixated on education," says Wilson. "I would sit there and the teachers would be talking about things that I thought were so liberating and so transforming that I began to look at education and knowledge as signs of empowerment."

Wilson attended all-black schools from kindergarten through high school. Although he was aware of the civil rights movement and remembers the day Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, Wilson says most blacks in his community simply accepted the way things were.

"It was a very peculiar kind of culture," says Wilson. "It's almost like your sense of place had been ingrained in you by history and southern culture. Blacks and whites had their place and there wasn't much meaningful interaction. Looking back, that was just a bad period of wasted opportunity for so many."

But Wilson got lucky, with some respected community leaders and educators stepping in as mentors. Beatrice Jones, an elementary school teacher and the only person in the community with a college degree, was one who saw potential in Wilson when he was in the third or fourth grade. Jones would pen speeches and take Wilson to different churches around the state, where he would recite what she wrote.

"I really attribute a lot of my success to that foundation she established early on," says Wilson. "She never married, but I like to say she was married to the children in the community. Her calling was working directly with these diamonds in the rough and ensuring we were well polished and that we would emerge as gems."

In high school, Wilson credits his vocational agriculture teacher, H.L. Charlow, for opening his eyes to what the future could hold. A transformative moment came when Charlow drove Wilson and three other ninth-graders to Tuskegee University for the school's annual farmer's conference. Wilson says he was "mesmerized" as soon as he arrived on the idyllic campus of the historically black college.

"It was almost like Mr. Charlow knew if he put us in this environment we would see that blacks could achieve at the highest levels of excellence," Wilson says. "And then he put us in his truck and drove us through the Tuskegee (Ala.) community. I was shocked at the way blacks in Tuskegee were living. There were magnificent homes with well-manicured lawns and nice cars, and the people presented themselves with such dignity. That world I had never seen before. And as a result of that I was so motivated."

A few years later Wilson would enroll at Tuskegee himself. The morning he left for college his dad met him at the door. "He had on his overalls and he reached into his pocket and pulled something out and said, 'This is all that I have and I want to give this to you because you're doing something today no one in this family - I mean the entire extended family - has ever done. You are about to go to college.' And then he said, 'No, you're about to go to Tuskegee!' He was very proud of that."

Wilson looked down at his hand. In it was five dollars.

"He said 'I know it's not much, but it's all that I have,' " says Wilson. "I guess you can say that five dollars has taken me a long, long way."

After earning an undergraduate degree in political science in 1977 and a master's in education in 1979 from Tuskegee, Wilson went to work for the now-defunct Research and Development Institute of Philadelphia. He spent three years there working on the problem of high minority teenage unemployment rates in Philadelphia before enrolling at Harvard, where

he earned a master's degree in educational planning and administration in 1984, and a doctorate in administration, planning and social policy in 1987.

It was in graduate school at Harvard that he first learned about the Wisconsin Idea. "I always thought, wow, what a bold concept - this notion that a university can be everywhere and it can make its resources available to people throughout the state and respond to all the local challenges and local needs," he says. "I remember thinking, 'This is what I'm all about.' "

Over the next decade, Wilson would serve as director of the Office of Minority Programs for the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and as an assistant and associate provost at Rutgers University's Camden, N.J., campus. He also traveled the globe as part of an international leadership development program through the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, met with anti-apartheid leaders Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and helped establish the University of Namibia, the first college in Namibia, which gained its independence from South Africa in 1990.

At Auburn, the largest university in Alabama, Wilson helped connect the institution with numerous state, national and global constituents. In particular, he is credited with deepening the connection between Auburn and Wilson's native region, the economically depressed counties of the old cotton belt. "I'm very proud of my work at Auburn," says Wilson. "I think it's legacy-type work."

But when he learned about chancellorship openings with UW-Extension and UW Colleges in 2005, Wilson felt it was time to begin another chapter in his life.

"These institutions are so close to who I am as a person and reflect the way I see the world," says Wilson. "We are trying to make both indispensable to the state of Wisconsin in terms of access to higher education and serving the greater needs of the state."

Wilson views the UW Colleges as an accessible path to a high-quality education. "You should be able to access this without mortgaging the house" he says.

On the UW-Extension side, Wilson believes it's an institution without peer in the country. "It's incredible how we can use research from UW-Madison and UW-Eau Claire and UW-Platteville and UW-River Falls, and you put it into the UW-Extension pipeline and deliver it to remote areas of the state to be used in local communities. This is the embodiment of the Wisconsin Idea, and in my tenure we've been all about living that idea to its fullest every single day."

To get to know the state and connect with its people, Wilson resolved to visit all 72 counties - a feat he recently accomplished. "I think I've been on every back road in the state," he says.

On one of his first trips to Green County, Wilson met Cathy Cryor Burgweger, who chairs the Green County Agriculture and Extension Education Committee and lives on a farm in the town of Brooklyn. She says she sensed there was something "very down-to-earth" about Wilson during her first meetings with the chancellor.

"He's very articulate and bright and you know he's well-educated, or he wouldn't be in the position that he is," she says. "But he doesn't promote that he has a Harvard Ph.D. He's very humble and personable. I think people that come from the ground up have a better ability to relate to all kinds of people."

He was even willing to try out his yodeling skills when Green County hosted UW-Extension's Wisconsin Farm Technology Days. For a guy from Alabama with no Swiss heritage, says Burgweger, "he did a good job."

Given the still sluggish economy, Wilson will have to continue to sell the importance of the UW Colleges and UW-Extension to state, local and community leaders as budgets at all levels continue to come under closer scrutiny. "There's no doubt that the biggest challenge facing both institutions is resources," says Wilson.

On the UW-Extension side, each county is responsible for funding 40 percent of each extension office, with Extension picking up the other 60 percent. Green County, for example, kicks in about \$260,000 each year, and that helps fund, among other things, an agriculture agent who works primarily with dairy farmers, a 4-H agent, a family living educator and an economic development educator.

Not every county, however, is as committed to UW-Extension. Last November, Jefferson County cut by 25 percent its contribution to the UW-Extension office, forcing the elimination of that county's longtime livestock and dairy agent. And that's in a county with a \$1.5 billion agriculture business.

"Look, I'm coming at this from the UW-Extension side, but making these cuts makes no sense," says Burgweger. "(A county) puts in four dollars and it's matched by six dollars in funding from Extension, and then you have the university coming into your community to try to help you. I think what you get back compared to what you put in is just tremendous. I know it's tough times and people are looking for places to cut, but these are times when you have to look to investing in your future."

Because of the slumping economy, the number of people using the services provided by UW Colleges and UW-Extension is growing, even as state support is remaining mostly flat. On an average day, more than 3,000 residents have contact with a county-based Cooperate Extension educator; 560 take part in a continuing education course or distance-learning program; and 50 participate in a small business development training course.

Wilson attributes this year's record enrollment at the UW Colleges - a jump of nearly 5 percent over last year's record numbers - to the economy and the relatively low tuition at these institutions. While yearly tuition at most schools continues to go up, the UW Colleges for a fourth straight year are charging \$4,268 for in-state students.

"So we are really getting flooded with people," says Wilson. "But our revenue base isn't growing, so that's a problem we're having to deal with."

While the 13 UW Colleges might not be well-known to some around the state, there's little doubt those campuses are valuable assets to the communities they serve.

"I don't think I can overstate its importance," Fruit, who runs WRCO in Richland Center, says of UW-Richland. "I really don't. First from an economic standpoint, not only do our students have an opportunity to attend an affordable college, but the dollars that UW-Richland brings to our community are very important. Secondly, the quality of people, the faculty and staff, are huge contributors to our community in so many ways. And for a rural community, the college really adds diversity to the area. It's a key cog in the well-being of this area."

Wilson says he hopes the people of Wisconsin are aware of what they have in the UW System and its various institutions.

"I hope they really, really understand how valuable this asset is," says Wilson. "There isn't any other state in the country with two institutions that do a better job of serving local needs and are of such high quality, yet are not absorbing humongous resources. They make it possible for people to access success."