How a quirky former football coach upended the staid world of libraries and changed the role of legislative research forever.

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Photos: Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS)

State politics is teeming with colorful characters and controversies—the stuff of history and legend. By comparison, a central institution of state governance—the legislative staff agency—seems staid. But that’s only if you don’t know the story.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the modern legislative staff agency simply did not exist. The New York State Library would often provide books and other research materials to legislators down the street in Albany, but there was no equivalent help in any other state. As a result, most citizen legislators tackled thorny, esoteric issues on their own, often with disastrous results.

Private individuals and groups often were able to exploit this void of effective reference services. As Samuel Rothstein concluded in one study of legislatures, “Lawmakers, mostly inexperienced and often not well-educated, had to cope with social and technical problems of growing complexity, possessing little more information than that which could be filtered through the partisan propaganda of lobbyists and special interest groups.”

Not surprisingly, state legislatures sank in the eyes of the public, and scholars began to rethink the way laws were made. The situation was indeed problematic, but this reform effort would produce tremendous results.

The Football Star

Charles McCarthy stepped onto the stage nearly by accident. A former college football star turned academic, McCarthy arrived in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1901, freshly graduated and unemployed. A bright student who had risen from poverty, McCarthy had developed an impressive network of friends, including John D. Rockefeller Jr. Through his connections at the University of Wisconsin, McCarthy obtained a job with the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, where he became a state documents librarian.

McCarthy took over a relatively new program, where he managed a small collection of documents recently separated from the library and placed in the Capitol. On paper, his tasks were merely to catalog and preserve the materials in his collection. But his ambitions soon grew far beyond that.

McCarthy dreamed of a much more active program, in which he and his small sub-library served as a direct bridge between legislatures and the information they needed. In a letter to Rockefeller in 1902,
McCarthy claimed he would soon enter “a field between the theoretical work of the University and the practical work of the legislature that has never been touched.”

**A Help Center Is Born**

By the time the Legislature returned to session in 1903, McCarthy had taken a bold step. In addition to caring for the materials in his collection, he had turned the library into a help center of sorts for legislators. In addition to its traditional document collection, the library provided up-to-date materials on pertinent issues—and McCarthy’s expert advice on where any information could be found.

Today’s library visitors might not see this as an innovation, but in 1903, McCarthy’s vision represented nothing short of a rupture. Traditionally, a library mainly housed knowledge; under McCarthy, the Wisconsin library actively disseminated it. This broke the rules in the library business—legislative or otherwise.

What inspired McCarthy to transform his library into the beginnings of the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau? No one really knows. The state library wasn’t even paying him. Some claim McCarthy wanted to do New York’s State Library, led by Melvil Dewey, one better. Others argue the Capitol’s proximity to the university played a role.

Regardless, McCarthy had started something new and exciting. He reached out to legislators, receiving strong support and requests for more services. And he quickly secured a significantly larger budget.

**The Wisconsin Idea**

McCarthy’s library soon began to provide many of the services now associated with the modern legislative staff—he compiled information, shared it with lawmakers and other state governments, and wrote legislation. Over time, McCarthy and his colleagues at the university would incorporate these tasks into a set of ideals that became known as the “Wisconsin Idea.”

Like Wisconsin’s library itself, many of the tenets of the Wisconsin Idea are taken for granted today. Broadly, the Wisconsin Idea stressed the union of the university, with its scholarly resources, and the state’s residents, but especially the state government. This creed carried immense implications for the Legislature. Among other things, it held that a well-trained librarian should lead the legislative reference library, that the library should employ a strictly nonpartisan staff, with some expertise in politics and economics, and that the staff should assist legislators in everything from bill drafting to research.

These ideals and practices were radical for the time. They entailed a very active form of research—McCarthy would compile and analyze materials, then create his own guides on a given subject. Under this model, the role of the legislative librarian shifted from custodian of information to scholar and analyst.

McCarthy further pushed the envelope by insisting that his staffers be responsible for the accuracy of the information they provided. “There was real disagreement among legislative reference libraries at the time about the extent to which legislative reference librarians should be responsible for the validity of the information supplied,” according to a study by Paul Healey. “Generally, legislative reference libraries established as adjuncts of general libraries took the conservative approach that they should not.” But McCarthy pressed on.

The sheer novelty of this approach caused quite the controversy among career librarians, and it’s not hard to imagine why. McCarthy had only recently entered the ancient profession, and yet this former football coach immediately wanted to upend it.

McCarthy’s library didn’t become a modern legislative reference agency overnight, but his reforms would play a pivotal role. Yet at the time, they were nothing short of bizarre—the products of a quirky accidental librarian.

**Spreading the Word**

As the Wisconsin library grew and matured into a reference service, McCarthy set his sights on other states. Popular with his Legislature and armed with a certain celebrity status, McCarthy embarked on an evangelizing mission to spread the Wisconsin Idea.

He wrote a book, traveled extensively across the country and took every opportunity to speak to state governments and associations of librarians about his vision. McCarthy soon boasted a social network of the day’s leading librarians. And he helped organize a course at the University of Wisconsin on legislative reference, ensuring a steady supply of new believers.

It all paid off. When McCarthy started work in 1901, no legislative staff of this sort...

The progressives succeeded in transfiguring American politics. Within a few years, they counted new federal agencies and constitutional amendments among their victories. Though less talked about, the proliferation of Wisconsin-style legislative staff represented another key move toward effective, professional governance.

The Wisconsin Idea played central and successful roles in McCarthy’s campaign for staff services. Within two years of his book’s publication, the U.S. Congress allotted money for reference work, and with each legislative session, more states were doing the same. By 1919, at least 22 states had staff providing assistance with reference work and bill drafting, though their scope varied widely.

Legislative staff agencies continued to proliferate and grew increasingly recognized. Many political scientists lauded the work of staff in Wisconsin and elsewhere, and by the 1930s, the further expansion of staff resources was a fixture in the many calls for legislative reforms.

In 1938, political scientist Edward Witte wrote, “Technical services are universally acknowledged to be very necessary to the reasonably efficient functioning of state legislatures; where established, they function without arousing serious opposition, and legislators do not hesitate to make use of them.” His conclusion: “Services of this kind are worth all the effort that anyone can put into them; and, clearly, such services are very necessary in all states.”

These calls for expanded services were answered. By the time the 1943-44 Book of States hit the press, only Delaware, North Dakota, Tennessee and Utah had no reference services. Finally, by the 1960s, all state legislatures maintained some version of a reference service, and by the 1970s, state auditors and more legislative clerks were joining the ranks of professional legislative staff agencies.

And all because of the vision of a quirky football coach and scholar.