Since our founding some twenty years ago, COWS has promoted “high road” solutions to social problems. These treat fairness and equal opportunity, environmental sustainability, and strong and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development, not tragic tradeoffs.

COWS is a “think-and-do tank” based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We work primarily in the areas of work organization and human capital systems, clean energy, transportation, and government performance. We develop ideas for advancing the high road, test them in practice, and evaluate results. We propagate high-road innovations through technical assistance, public outreach, and the policy learning networks we run for state and local government executives.

COWS is nonpartisan but unapologetic about its values. We want a world of equal freedom and opportunity, learning, and security — for all. We appreciate the distance of this desired world from our present one, but are confident of its achievability. We are because we think all humans want the freedom and opportunity to develop their abilities that this desired world would respect, and that humanity is capable of lifting whatever limits it has placed on its own flourishing. Whether humanity does this lifting or not will depend in part on advances in our knowledge. But in larger part it will depend on a critical mass of humans showing the courage and determination to act on their hopes for a better world by actually achieving part of it, inspiring others to join them. COWS views itself as a tiny contributor to this larger project. By demonstrating high-road solutions in this world, we aim to show the rationality of hope for a far better one.

One attraction of the high road is that almost any community can start building it immediately. “Reduce waste, add value, capture and share the benefits of doing both, repeat” is the high-roader’s basic mantra, with clear imperatives for action. Start now to reduce the fantastic waste in your systems of developing skills, organizing work, producing things, and moving people and goods. Start now to map your regional economy to locate areas of potential competitive advantage, and develop those areas with the aid of more efficiently organized places. Start now to improve the adaptive and learning capacities and power of your democratic institutions, recognizing them not only as a force for representation and justice, but also wealth generation.

This commitment to building the high road now gives coherence to what might seem disparate COWS’ activities — from designing an “on-bill” financing program for improving building energy efficiency; to producing reliable analysis of Wisconsin’s workforce and economy; to convening and helping governors, mayors, and transportation officials interested in pursuing a high-road strategy in their states and cities.

In this report, we summarize some of this work over the past year or so. I hope you find the summary useful and the work worthy, and that you ask us more about them both.

Joel Rogers
COWS Director
For nearly two decades, COWS has been at the center of research and policy innovation on job quality and workforce development in Wisconsin and the United States. We have developed and advanced policy and institutional innovations that create strong regional economies based on quality jobs — those with decent wages, benefits, and opportunities for advancement — and a competitive 21st century workforce.

In 2010, national experts ranked COWS among the top 15 national organizations in workforce development:

www.myphilanthropedia.org/top-nonprofits/national/workforce-development

This work takes many forms. From convening and advising state and local leaders in the design and maintenance of training partnerships among business and labor; to policy prescriptions informing the growing field of “green jobs” training; to research on the changing industrial structure and organization of work itself, and its consequences for career trajectories and needed education and training services, COWS seeks to build the base of knowledge and push the frontier of good and experimental practice in human capital system design. Most of this work is directed at a national audience, but it often originates with work in Wisconsin.

In Wisconsin, we also perform an important public role as a go-to source for media and community leaders on the shape of the Wisconsin economy, for example through our biennial The State of Working Wisconsin, a comprehensive analysis of wage and income trends in the state; and Wisconsin Job Watch, a monthly snapshot of jobs data. This knowledge and recent releases on public workers in the state have made COWS a key resource in Wisconsin’s recent fights over the state budget, collective bargaining, and economic development.

Other highlights include publication and promotion of Greener Skills, a follow-up to our earlier Greener Pathways (2008). With more than 60,000 copies in circulation, and well received at more than 20 conferences around the country, the report has significantly advanced the national conversation on credentialing and green jobs. COWS has also continued work with state leaders from business, labor, and government — in particular, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and the Wisconsin Technical College System — in design and promotion of industry partnerships around the state. In groundbreaking work, COWS partnered with the technical college system to document the trajectory of adult learners through education pathways, which will provide a firm basis in evidence for further reform.

WORK. WAGES. SKILLS.

COWS is a go-to source for media and community leaders on the shape of the Wisconsin economy.

CONDUCTED EXTENSIVE OUTREACH IN SPRING 2011 through research reports, presentations, and response to media on public-sector workers, collective bargaining, and the state budget in Wisconsin.

GREENER SKILLS: HOW CREDENTIALS CREATE VALUE IN THE CLEAN ENERGY ECONOMY proposes a more rational framework for human capital development in a greening economy.

BUILDING BRIDGES IN WISCONSIN: CONNECTING WORKING ADULTS WITH COLLEGE CREDENTIALS AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT profiles innovative “bridge” programs for working adults being pioneered at technical colleges throughout the state.

MAPPING GREEN CAREER PATHWAYS: JOB TRAINING INFRASTRUCTURE AND OPPORTUNITIES IN WISCONSIN outlines key components of the state’s workforce development systems that could be aligned and expanded to support an emerging clean energy sector. Produced in partnership with the Apollo Alliance and other Midwestern states.


WISCONSIN JOB WATCH provides monthly updates on Wisconsin’s jobs picture.

DEVELOPED AND FACILITATED A POLICY ACADEMY FOCUSED ON STRENGTHENING STATE DATA SYSTEMS to improve outcomes for low-income adults for the Working Poor Families Project. Representatives from more than 22 states attended the event at the Joyce Foundation in Chicago.
Long before it was fashionable, COWS was talking about “clean energy” — meaning both greater efficiency in our use of energy and renewable energy generation. We’ve become a national leader in promoting clean energy, particularly at the state and local level.

Most of this work has focused on improving energy efficiency, starting with the most important source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions: buildings. Working in several cities, we have designed and seen through to implementation programs that radically reduce energy consumption for a majority of buildings and are financially sustainable (self-financing out of savings). This work is “high road” not just in its attention to a major opportunity for sustainability, but equity. Such programs have tremendous potential to reduce GHG emissions, create family-supporting jobs for communities that need them, and capture the benefits of both – in health, income, and wealth – for local community development.

The most far-reaching of our energy programs is the Efficiency Cities Network (ECN). Through ECN, COWS convenes a national learning network of over 900 representatives of federal, state, and local governments; associated academic and nonprofit organizations; and high-road businesses, with the aim of sharing best practices. We host a webinar every two weeks, with a panel of experts drawn from leading programs and institutions around the country, to explore topics of interest. We host a website with records of these webinars and other resources and maintain an active listserv of ECN members.

COWS is also working to increase the uptake of energy efficiency programs in a number of more targeted ways. Through our founding role in the Emerald Cities Collaborative, we are working with ten cities nationally to create partnerships between labor unions and community groups to support city-scale retrofit programs. We have worked to connect these programs with leading energy efficiency financiers, sparking several million dollars of new investments. COWS has worked even more closely with the cities of Milwaukee and Madison, helping to write a $20 million federal grant to support energy efficiency. In Racine, we have partnered with the city to create a successful retrofit program.

Our most recent effort in this space is a partnership with rural electric cooperatives in Wisconsin. Working in partnership with the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association and three rural electric cooperatives, COWS will design and pilot an on-bill finance system for energy efficiency upgrades to buildings owned or occupied by cooperative members.

**Energy Efficiency Innovation**

Through the Efficiency Cities Network, convened over 900 people to share best practices. As part of this initiative, we’ve hosted over 45 calls on topics ranging from financing for energy efficiency programs, to program design and case studies, to outreach strategies and marketing.

Worked with the City of Racine to launch the first Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) program in the Midwest in March 2010, the Racine Energy Efficiency Project (REEP).

Launched a partnership with rural electric cooperatives in Wisconsin to design and pilot a retrofit finance program that will improve coop members’ buildings and allow them to pay for energy efficiency improvements as a service on their utility bill.

Partnered with the U.S. Department of Energy to connect city decision-makers with financial resources and technical assistance, resulting in $38 million in initial investment in municipal building retrofits in Seattle as well as significant investment being explored in many other cities throughout the country.

As cofounders of the Emerald Cities Collaborative, worked to create partnerships between community and labor leaders to create large-scale energy efficiency retrofit programs in ten major cities, creating access to good jobs for communities that need them.

Created Wisconsin Energy Efficiency (WE2) in partnership with the Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation and the cities of Milwaukee, Madison, and Racine, targeting energy efficiency upgrades in residential, commercial, and industrial buildings in the three cities.
TRANSPORTATION:

STATE SMART TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVE

Surface transportation costs the U.S. in excess of $1 trillion a year and plays a huge role in American competitiveness and quality of life. Considered as a system, however, U.S. transportation is a poster child for poor planning, excess costs and inefficiencies, staggering environmental damage, great contributions to worsening economic and social inequalities, and slow government response to changing demographics and worsening fiscal realities.

While important to continue, most federal efforts at improving this system have failed. In 2010, with private foundation and U.S. Department Of Transportation (DOT) support, COWS launched the State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI) to take a different approach — to reform our transportation practices from the ground up, starting with state DOTs. By “smart” transportation we mean high-road transportation, i.e., transportation practices that promote equity as well as wealth generation, environmental sustainability, and efficient and accountable government.

TO REACH THESE ENDS, SSTI IS WORKING WITH EXECUTIVES FROM NEARLY 20 STATE DOTS TO:

1. Direct technical assistance for breakthrough innovations that advance these goals and are replicable. Initial projects have included creation of better land-use and transportation planning tools, facilitation of a statewide process to address climate change, and broad reviews of DOTs’ culture and policies.

2. Form a Community of Practice (COP) among member DOTs. SSTI hosts three national meetings a year among DOT executives from our participating states, with peer-to-peer exchange on shared problems, good practice, promising innovations, and the like. We support this COP through webinars, research, and publications to help share information and spread reform.

3. Influence the national discussion on transportation. State DOTs have many innovative reforms to share — more than decision-makers in Washington give them credit for. Showing these agencies’ ability and willingness to make positive change will help shape the discussion over federal policy in a more constructive way.

Smart Transportation

HOSTED TWO COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE MEETINGS for transportation executives and staff from the member states as well as outside experts to explore best practices and new innovations in smart transportation policy and practice.

LAUNCHED SIX TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECTS

Arizona – Developing a work-plan for ADOT to implement a variety of reforms described in its smart transportation vision statement.

Colorado – Assisting CDOT and other state agencies and local governments in producing a framework for lowering transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions.

Delaware – Providing DelDOT with a new scenario planning tool that will demonstrate graphically to land-use authorities the consequences of alternative development decisions.

Iowa – Working with IDOT to shape a “fix-it-first” investment strategy.

Pennsylvania – Worked with PennDOT to evaluate and suggest next steps in the smart transportation reforms it implemented over the last eight years. Evaluation published as SSTI Review of PennDOT’s Smart Transportation.

Washington – Worked with WSDOT to evaluate and suggest next steps in its smart transportation efforts. Based on SSTI input, the agency is reworking its “Moving Washington” public campaign. Our evaluation report will be out shortly.

18 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PARTICIPATE IN SSTI.
America’s challenges demand bold progressive leadership from states. The mission of COWS’ Center for State Innovation (CSI) is to help governors and other state executives meet this leadership challenge.

CSI believes that every state can get on the high road of shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. It offers evidence-based, outcome-measured, fiscally prudent strategies for doing so. It also promotes a “progressive federalism” in which national government encourages state innovation and experimentation.

Since opening its doors in September 2007, the Center for State Innovation has organized nearly 100 policy events — including focused strategy academies for in-state technical assistance on various issues, regional or national conferences, and webinar series — for 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The goal for each event was the same: to provide elected state executives and their senior staff evidence-based, high-road policy options on issues of concern to them.

Along with the content and rationale for these policy options, CSI provides hard data on their cost and benefit, advice on their effective messaging and implementation, metrics for managing and measuring their success in implementation, and connection to follow-up technical assistance. The range of issues on which CSI has provided these services covers most major issues of state policy, including economic and workforce development, energy and environment, education, housing, health care, transportation and land use, election administration, revenue and budgeting, public safety, economic security, and work-family balance policy.

We can do this because we’ve assembled a national network of experts on state government — think tanks, universities, former state officials, technical assistance providers, and others — that provide their services for free. CSI can thus offer state executives turnkey access to the best policy, messaging, and technical assistance in the country, at no cost to them but their time.

Progressive Policy Support

HOSTED THE “LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2010 ELECTIONS” WEBINAR SERIES in November / December 2010, in which experts on election administration and democracy reviewed administrative successes and difficulties during the course of the 2010 elections with state officials and staff. Topics covered included voter registration modernization, alternatives to plurality elections, and election protection.

HOSTED THE THIRD ANNUAL NATIONAL MEETING OF STATE POLICY DIRECTORS and other senior state officials in which 16 states participated. The meeting featured sessions on each of the major areas of state budgeting as well as briefings on messaging national health care reform and federal efforts on economic and workforce development.

FACILITATED DAY-LONG STRATEGY ACADEMIES focused on key policy areas for states including: New Mexico (education and workforce), Iowa (government performance), and Louisiana (workforce). Following up on the Iowa academy, CSI has provided ongoing policy advice and technical assistance around specific IT issues to the state.

ORGANIZED AN HOUR-LONG WEBINAR FOR “PERFORMANCESTAT: IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES” that provided both a general overview and specific examples of the implementation challenges and subsequent benefits of adopting and working with a PerformanceStat management tool. Over 20 people from 13 states participated.

ORGANIZED AN INFORMATIONAL CALL WITH SENIOR OFFICIALS FROM THE BANK OF NORTH DAKOTA to discuss the workings of their bank and its potential as a model for adoption by other states. Policymakers from five states attended, as well as representatives from interested state groups.

AS PART OF THE CLEAN ENERGY ROADSHOW COLLABORATION, organized a briefing in Washington, DC, and worked closely with other coalition members to pull together the two-day “Wisconsin Clean Energy Roadshow” in Racine, Milwaukee, and Madison in February 2010.
COWS’ Mayors Innovation Project (MIP) is a learning network among American mayors committed to showing leadership in moving their metropolitan regions to the high road, beginning with reform in their own cities. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing social issues — climate change, infrastructure, economic revitalization, health care, prison reentry, and more. MIP supports and encourages this innovation by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that cities can use right away. MIP helps its member participants lead by example, share their experiences with peers, and make this argument for cities nationally.

MIP hosts one or two meetings every year, which are informal and relaxed but packed with substance. MIP mayors pick policy areas important to their cities, invite national experts on the topics, and sit down over a couple days to discuss and develop city strategies in these areas. There are very few safe places where mayors aren’t expected to already have all the answers, and have the time, space, and resources to reflect and work on the big challenges. The MIP conferences are such a place. More than 100 cities, representing some 33 million Americans, have attended MIP meetings.

MIP also maintains an active listserv and publishes the Good Ideas from Cities e-newsletter to share best practices from cities nationwide. In the past year, we also began providing direct technical assistance to cities on replicable, breakthrough experiments in high-road governance.

“Cites are where innovations are happening in this country.”
Mayor Ralph Becker, Salt Lake City

Sharing Good Ideas

HOSTED SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS IN JANUARY 2010 AND 2011. Our most recent meeting — bringing together mayors and top staff from nearly 50 cities — featured presentations on smart transportation, getting to better building stock, “green” stormwater solutions, and tools for place-based economic development.

LAUNCHED THE GOOD IDEAS FROM CITIES E-NEWSLETTER, sent biweekly to MIP’s listserv of 300 members, which shares innovative ideas and best practices on topics including infrastructure, economic development, alternative energy, and more.

SUCCESSFULLY RECRUITED NEW STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS from Burlington, Vermont; Cleveland, Ohio; Eugene, Oregon; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Salt Lake City, Utah. They will join representatives from Athens, Georgia; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Berkeley, California; Des Moines, Iowa; Gainesville, Florida; Madison, Wisconsin; and Scranton, Pennsylvania in guiding and advising the project.

LAUNCHED A PILOT TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM in early 2011 in which cities apply for expert assistance with a policy or issue they are working on. We are working with six member cities on issues that range from neighborhood revitalization to recycling to food systems.
COWS is a nonprofit think-and-do tank, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that promotes “high road” solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. COWS is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS
Download these and other COWS publications at www.cows.org.

- Wisconsin's Public Employees: A Foundation for Quality of Life in the State
- The Wisconsin Retirement System Is One of the Healthiest in the Country
- SSTI Review of PennDOT's Smart Transportation
- Wisconsin Job Watch (published monthly)
- Wisconsin Bridges Case Studies
- Better Jobs for In-Home Direct Care Workers (with the Direct Care Alliance)
- Employer-Sponsored Health Insurance in Wisconsin
- The State of Working Wisconsin 2010
- Building Bridges in Wisconsin: Connecting Working Adults with College Credentials and Career Advancement
- Milwaukee Energy Efficiency (ME2) Case Study
- Racine Energy Efficiency Program (REEP) Case Study
- Wisconsin Women, Wages and the Recession
- Greener Skills: How Credentials Create Value in the Clean-Energy Economy
- Mapping Green Career Pathways: Job Training Infrastructure and Opportunities in Wisconsin (with the Apollo Alliance)