BUILDING THE HIGH ROAD

COWS

EQUITY, SUSTAINABILITY, DEMOCRACY

PROGRAM OVERVIEW
ABOUT COWS

Based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, COWS is a national think-and-do tank 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.

COWS is a national resource, an incubator, a convener and more. We are best understood through our work and the high road vision that provides the foundation of it. You will find that in these pages.

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Since our founding more than twenty years ago, COWS has promoted “high road” solutions to social problems. These treat equity, sustainability, and capable democratic organization as necessary and achievable complements in human development, not tragic tradeoffs. They use better democratic organization to increase the productivity of places and to capture and share the benefits of doing so, treating democracy not only as a source of voice and equity, but wealth generation.

COWS is a think-and-do tank. We develop ideas for scalable high-road projects. We provide research, design advice, and technical assistance to those willing to turn those ideas into reality. And we evaluate, publicize, and suggest lessons from these experiments. Strictly nonpartisan, COWS is unapologetic about its values. We want a world of freedom, opportunity, and security for all. And, well aware of the distance of this desired world from our present one, we are confident about getting there from here. We take humanity to be fully capable of removing the many barriers it has erected to its own flourishing, and also take virtually all its members to have a basic desire for freedom, respect, and real opportunity to develop their abilities and contribute. That’s more than enough to work with. COWS’ aim is to get more people to take the risk and do the work of acting on those hopes. We do so by demonstrating their feasibility in our particular projects, and by supporting the broader democratic movements with interest in extending them.

High road solutions treat equity, sustainability, and capable democratic organization as necessary and achievable complements in human development, not tragic tradeoffs.

COWS’ applied work is primarily in the areas of better jobs and skills; clean energy and, increasingly, other issues of greening the economy; and smarter and more sustainable transportation. We also run a series of policy learning networks and technical assistance programs for high-road advocates and state and local government executives. And we’ve recently begun building a common public library of progressive state and local law, providing elected officials and advocates access to thousands of high-road policy tools. Based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, our varied projects take us to most of the 50 states and hundreds of cities.

As we see it, the high road frame is both transformative in ambition and immediately practical in application. The basic high-road imperative — “use better democratic organization in places to reduce waste, add value, and capture and share the benefits of doing both” — can be acted on now in almost any community. We can act now to reduce the fantastic waste of our present systems of producing human capital, organizing work, transporting people and goods, and draining our natural capital. Act now to map the value flows of regional economies, and their areas of current or potential competitive advantage. Act now to build the social will and organization to reduce that waste and add that value in better organized, more highly networked, productive, and sustainable places. And act now to ensure that those who contribute to this project share in the gains.

COWS’ commitment to building the high road now, and feeding the movement to build it everywhere, is what unites what might otherwise seem disconnected projects — from designing innovative energy-efficiency programs for neighborhoods and cities; to promoting industry partnerships in metropolitan regions; to convening public and private stakeholders on solving energy, transportation, or water issues; to working with state and local elected officials and public interest advocates on a range of other problems and opportunities. In this program review, we summarize essential elements of this work. We hope you find the summary useful, and that you’ll be in touch with any questions, or new ideas for work, that you might have.

Joel Rogers
COWS Director
JOBS AND SKILLS

The high road for workers implies moving the nation to higher levels of skills (qualified workers) and a greater reward for work (quality jobs). COWS’ Jobs and Skills agenda, developed over 20 years, focuses consistently on both. Our contributions have included some of the earliest national work on industry-led training innovations, career pathways, and workforce system innovations. We continue with ongoing work in these areas, and on to critical national issues in training for greener jobs, debates on skills standards, testing and credentialing, and research on the design of a more effective skill system.

In 2010, national experts ranked COWS among the top fifteen national organizations in workforce development given our work on these issues.

The high road requires not only supports like training, but also policies to close off the low road, to redirect supports away from low-wage/no-benefit firms, and to otherwise raise and strengthen the floor under wages. COWS’ research has drawn a more complete picture of the design of jobs — from manufacturing to hotels — and the fallout of changes in those jobs for workers. This research builds the case for stronger wages, especially at the bottom of the labor market.

From innovations on the ground to basic research and beyond, COWS is designing, describing, and disseminating new strategies to build skilled workers and quality jobs.

COWS’ most important contributions in jobs and skills have always been our practical experiments with partnerships, pathways, and credentialing, and the advice we’ve been asked to give by countless state and local officials and training providers, and labor, business, and community leaders. Whether in a smaller town like Wisconsin Rapids or in the city of Milwaukee, COWS supports and builds practical solutions that also become national models.

The high road also requires democracy, and that rests on a better public understanding of the economy and changes in it. In Wisconsin and beyond, COWS serves as a go-to source for media and community leaders on the economy, low-wage/no-benefit jobs, and the challenges working people face as inequality climbs.

Understanding Work, Training, and What Economic Change Means for Workers

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

EARLY IN OUR HISTORY, COWS DESIGNED AND SUPPORTED THE WISCONSIN REGIONAL TRAINING PARTNERSHIP (WRTP), still the nation’s premiere labor-led training partnership. This year, COWS and the WRTP released Manufacturing Better Opportunity, describing recent success in connecting central city residents to good manufacturing jobs. Together with the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and the WRTP, we’ll host policy roundtables in Milwaukee and Madison on the topic to identify and build support for policy change.

STATE POLICY TO SUPPORT TRAINING AND SKILLS for working adults — with documents and outreach on career pathways (Pathways to Competitiveness) and industry partnerships (Employers Take the Lead), COWS has contributed evidence to promote these national practices and helped build support for them in the state.

THE TENTH EDITION OF THE STATE OF WORKING WISCONSIN was released Labor Day 2012. It is a widely disseminated and appreciated sourcebook on the economy in the state and how it is working for working people.

OUR MONTHLY JOB WATCH PROVIDES ONGOING INFORMATION on the economy. This work also leads to regional analyses, such as Vital Signs 2013 and the Healthcare Retirement & Departure Survey for guiding local economic and workforce decision makers.

BETTER SKILLS AND WAGES: Who Would be Helped by Stronger Pathways? In Wisconsin, we developed a statistical approach to identifying low-wage workers in need of better skills. By identifying a target population, we put a concrete number on the scale of need for skills. Together with CLASP, we adapted and disseminated the model, providing the profile for every state to support advocacy and policy around skills and wages.
COWS has long been a national leader in promoting “clean energy” (energy efficiency and renewable energy generation) and the creation of good jobs and equity in its development. This interest has been reflected in publications going back to our beginnings, the later co-founding of the Apollo Alliance in the mid-’00’s, and work with Milwaukee and other cities on retrofitting their building stock. In 2008, we helped found the Emerald Cities Collaborative, which is now driving hundreds of millions of dollars of investment toward efficiency retrofit projects across the nation. We also continue to be active participants in a national, state, and local policy debate on how best to realize the promise of a clean energy future.

This work on cleaner energy joins with our long standing commitment to stronger training in our ground breaking and highly respected series on green jobs – Greener Pathways (2008), Greener Skills (2010) and, most recently, Greener Reality (2012). The series and convenings around it helped build a more rational policy framework for human capital development in a greening economy – one that helps ensure that low-income, under- and unemployed workers can advance into family-sustaining careers, while the communities in which they live improve resilience to climate insecurity. COWS’ work animates and connects leaders in labor, business, community, education, and government working on related (but often segregated) issues in climate and energy; poverty and green economic development; equity and skill delivery. This work also bridges the gap between the conversation on green jobs and training and the parallel dialogue on adaptation and reliance.

Our interest in cleaner energy and skills for the greener economy are certainly ongoing, and often consuming. But recently, we’ve begun to apply high road approaches to two other areas of community infrastructure: water and local food systems. And as in all areas, we seek to move the conversation on greener infrastructure to a deeper consideration of equity, opportunity, and resilience.

Building Sustainable Energy, Training, Water, and Food Systems

EFFICIENCY CITIES NETWORK (ECN): ECN is a webinar-based 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 as they emerge in the rapidly evolving city efficiency field. We’ve hosted over 70 calls on topics ranging from financing for energy efficiency programs, to program design, to outreach strategies.

IMPROVING SOLAR SKILLS: COWS serves as an expert advisor to the Interstate Renewable Energy Council and the USDOE SunShot Initiative, working to build a high-road clean energy sector through improved education and training across related industries. As chair of the National Working Group on Solar Career Pathways, COWS led the research and development of DOE’s interactive solar career map: http://www1.eere.energy.gov/solar/careermap/

PROMOTING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD: Within cities, residents face stark disparities in their access to fresh, healthy food. COWS’ Mayors Innovation Project released a policy brief on highlighting a range of strategies to develop local food capacities, enhance public health, and improve urban economies.

ENGAGING CITIES ON STORMWATER MANAGEMENT: Pollutants in urban stormwater runoff can contaminate streams, rivers and lakes – impacting public health, closing beaches, degrading fisheries, reducing groundwater recharge, and increasing costs to treat drinking water. Cities and the EPA are often in conflict over stormwater issues, despite sharing many of the same goals. COWS has facilitated four sessions between local governments and the EPA addressing green infrastructure, funding, development, and the forthcoming stormwater rule.

BRINGING ENERGY EFFICIENCY TO RURAL AREAS: COWS has worked with rural electric cooperatives to design and implement energy efficiency programs for their members, and has advocated with the USDA for increased funding for efficiency in rural areas, including rallying 40 disparate organizations to comment on a recent USDA rulemaking.
RAISE THE FLOOR MILWAUKEE
Putting a face on real data, this report confronts the crisis of poverty-wage work in Milwaukee, providing facts and options on policy and advocacy for higher wages, and making it clear how workers and the community win with a stronger floor.

GREENER REALITY
Defining equity, sustainability, and greater democratization as critical elements of a truly greener future, Greener Reality considers the practical and political challenges to achieving these in the United States.

THE INNOVATIVE DOT: A HANDBOOK OF POLICY AND PRACTICE
State transportation leaders need to innovate to ensure that their systems are more efficient and their constituents better satisfied. With 31 recommendations for these leaders to use, the handbook, produced by COWS’ SSTI, helps position transportation systems for a new economy. Increasingly, it is being used to educate tomorrow’s leaders on what forward-thinking transportation policy looks like.

CITIES AT WORK: PROGRESSIVE LOCAL POLICIES TO REBUILD THE MIDDLE CLASS
This compendium of local policies covering a wide range of metropolitan policy — from economic development, jobs standards, infrastructure and revenue, to housing, education, health and civil rights — is an essential resource to put cities on the high road.

ALICE: AMERICAN LEGISLATIVE AND ISSUE CAMPAIGN EXCHANGE
Created by COWS, the ALICE website — www.alicelaw.org — is a single, easily accessible place where progressives interested in state and local government can go to get model and exemplary laws that reflect their values and are close to the form needed to be acted on immediately.

DIVESTING FROM FOSSIL FUELS
COWS’ Mayors Innovation Project, working with 350.org, is supporting a growing fossil fuel divestment movement by providing resources to city leaders and activists on city divestment.
COWS launched the State Smart Transportation Initiative in 2010. Unique among projects in the transportation sector, SSTI focuses squarely on state transportation systems and their executive leaders.

Most transportation investments are made at the state and local level, either by the state and local governments that spend twice as much on transportation as the federal government, or by individuals and firms navigating the built environment those governments create. State and local governments also control most land use and enjoy implied or delegated power over most of the non-transportation built environment (e.g., buildings and energy and water infrastructure), which together drive most transportation demand and the feasible set of supply strategies for meeting it.

States are also drivers of public innovation, and a growing number of them are experimenting with smart transportation policy. Yet even the most successful state innovations tend not to be widely replicated, with little improving effect on the median of transportation practice.

States are well aware of both these facts, and of the climate, competitiveness, and fiscal calamities that await them unless they get their transportation act together. They are genuinely confused about how to do so, however, and would welcome help.

SSTI seizes the opportunity to offer support. In our work with states, we seek to facilitate experiments; celebrate success, draw lessons from failure, and communicate both widely; institutionalize a culture of cross-site learning, benchmarking, and improvement; and make fueling this engine of innovation, learning, communication, replication, and improvement itself a recognized end of national policy. SSTI does all this in ways that are practitioner-friendly and disciplined by interest in implementation.

**Reforming U.S. Transportation Policy and Practice**

**COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:** As a network of 19 states, SSTI regularly convenes state transportation secretaries for frank, informal discussion of smart transportation possibilities and practices. As peer-to-peer conversations with instant access to subject-matter expertise, these meetings cover a wide range of topics, from climate change to the future of transportation finance.

**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:** SSTI delivers expert guidance and research, including reviews of sustainability plans, recommendations for improving statewide transit systems, and comparative analyses of state revenue options.

**THE INNOVATIVE DOT: A HANDBOOK OF POLICY AND PRACTICE:** Written and produced with Smart Growth America, this SSTI compendium of best practices is now widely used for both professional and academic training.

**A VOICE FOR CHANGE:** Increasingly influential in the general transportation community, SSTI links policy-makers and policy-shapers to progressive, data-driven resources. The initiative leverages its network of national experts and its position as honest broker to steer transportation policy and practice toward a more rational future – one defined by environmental sustainability, shared prosperity, and more efficient, democratic governance.
PROGRESSIVE MODEL LEGISLATION

ALICE (American Legislative and Issue Campaign Exchange) is a new national project that is developing a one-stop, web-based library of progressive model law on a wide range of issues in state and local policy. ALICE aims to supply a small, and vital, part of the infrastructure for progressive change: model and exemplary laws that progressives might actually want to enact.

The website – www.alicelaw.org – provides a single, easily accessible place where progressives interested in state and local government can go to get a wide-ranging set of model and exemplary laws that reflect their values and can be acted on immediately. It offers models for law originating from the executive branch (e.g., executive orders and regulation) or directly from citizens (i.e., ballot initiatives and referenda) as well as from legislative bodies. Regardless of source, all laws are public and written by public interest advocates and volunteers, not corporate lobbyists.

“ALICE is a transparent, non-corporate, out-in-the-open, web-based library of model laws on a range of public interest issues. ALICE doesn’t have corporate or billionaire backers. The work is done by volunteers – so in the constant struggle for democracy it is still David versus Goliath. But as you’ll remember from that ancient story, giants don’t always win.”

Bill Moyers, Moyers & Company

Building a Public Good

BUILDING A LIBRARY OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS: To date, ALICE has collected or produced over 1000 exemplary laws, more than 200 model ones (with dozens more in production), and nearly 400 communication and research supports. These are organized and coded into 14 major policy areas of state and local government and fully searchable by a range of specific fields and keywords.

BUILDING A NETWORK OF DRAFTING AND POLICY EXPERTS: Apart from the efforts of COWS staff, the work thus far draws on the pro bono contributions of 116 students from 46 universities, 104 professors from 59 universities, and 148 unique advocacy organizations. This network both drafts model laws and supporting research documents and, with ALICE’s guidance, is part of an extensive quality-control process, which involves reviews of all new content by both the Madison headquarters and outside content experts.

SPREADING THE WORD: ALICE has begun an extensive outreach process, introducing the project at a number of law schools and professional events, and generating a good amount of press. Over fifteen hundred (it’s growing by the day) people – a wide mixture of academics and students and activists and electeds – have signed up for regular ALICE email alerts. And the ALICE website gets more than two thousand unique visitors a month and growing.
METROPOLITAN POLICY

COWS believes in the promise of cities. Because of their wealth, their greater sustainability, and their democratic values and organization, cities are the natural pillars of the high-road economy and society that we want to build. Most of our work touches on cities in some way, but the core of our city work is the Mayors Innovation Project.

“Mayors Innovation Project continues to offer the kind of in-depth offerings on topics that help shape successful communities. The expertise, experience and dialog are invaluable.”

Mayor Ralph Becker, Salt Lake City, Utah

The Mayors Innovation Project is a learning network among American mayors committed to showing leadership in moving their metropolitan region to the high road. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing social issues – climate change, infrastructure, economic revitalization, health care, prisoner reentry, and more. We support and encourage this innovation by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that cities can use right away. The project helps its members lead by example, share their experiences with peers, and make this argument for cities nationally.

The Mayors Innovation Project provides mayors and high-level city staff with a chance to share and learn about good ideas in an environment that’s informal and relaxed but packed with substance. We facilitate connection, discussion and peer to peer learning between cities and with experts. Since our inaugural meeting in 2005, we’ve held 12 meetings, attended by more than 150 local governments from 38 states, representing some 46 million Americans.

Sharing Good Ideas

2013 Summer Meeting in Oak Park, IL: Nationally renowned walkability expert, Dan Burden, shows Mayors how they can transform their own communities.

A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY HANDBOOK: In 2013, COWS released Cities at Work: Progressive Local Policies to Rebuild the Middle Class, a compendium of practical local policies in eight issue areas: economic development and job creation, infrastructure, revenue, job standards, housing, education, health and civil rights.

DIVESTMENT FROM FOSSIL FUELS: Members of the Mayors Innovation Project are leading the way by committing to divest their cities’ holdings from fossil fuel companies. In partnership with 350.org, we’re working with these cities to implement divestment. The movement is growing – over 20 local governments have made the commitment, and we’re working with many more to join them.

ENGAGING WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: Representatives from federal departments have been regular speakers at our meetings, keeping members up-to-date on federal programs that represent opportunities for cities, and engaging in dialog about how programs and policies can improve. Departments represented include EPA, DOE, HUD, DOT, OMB, and the Interagency Council on Homelessness.

INNOVATIVE MEETINGS: Twice-yearly meetings provide Mayors with cutting edge policy information in a unique peer learning environment. Mayors value our meetings because we bring in the top experts in the field, and provide them ample time for discussion. Our summer meetings feature member cities, where we incorporate tours that allow us to see innovation in action.

IN-DEPTH ASSISTANCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMS: While a lot of what we do is sharing information, we also go deep on issues when cities need us to. Over the past several years, we’ve offered extensive technical assistance on energy efficiency, food systems, planning and zoning, economic development, performance management, housing, recycling, and storm water management.
STATE POLICY

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 challenge. CSI offers evidence-based, outcome-measured, fiscally prudent strategies for state executives.

CSI has organized nearly one hundred policy events — including strategy academies for in-state technical assistance, regional or national conferences, and webinar series — for almost every state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The goal in each event was the same: to provide state executives and their staff evidence-based, high-road policy options on issues of concern.

“Shaping Arkansas’ workforce to compete at the forefront of the 21st-century job market takes the leadership of groups like the Center for State Innovation. By offering its dedication and ideas, this organization recognizes that a stronger workforce will benefit all of us in the decades to come.”
Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe

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 their success, and connection to follow-up technical assistance. 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.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS
Find our projects and publications at cows.org.

- Vital Signs 2013
- Wisconsin Job Watch
- The Innovative DOT
- Manufacturing Better Opportunity
- Greener Reality
- Making M.U.S.H. Energy Efficient
- Cities Promoting Access to Healthy, Local Food
- Raise the Floor Milwaukee
- The State of Working Wisconsin