

2026 Iwanter Prize Winner Announced

The Award Recognizes Excellence in Undergraduate Humanities Scholarship

MADISON, Wis. (August 4, 2026) – Recent graduate **David Meister** (B.A., May '26, History (honors) and Economics and a certificate in European Studies) received the 2026 [Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research](#), an annual award administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for the Humanities. The \$2,000 prize is given to a graduating senior who, through a senior thesis and general academic distinction, demonstrates outstanding humanities-based scholarship of a broad and interdisciplinary nature.

The prize was established in 2000 by alumnus Sidney E. Iwanter (B.A. '71, History), who said that in this “landscape of such chaos and uncertainty, it is uplifting to witness such a continuing form of scholarship from these seniors.”

Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research: David Meister

David Meister won the Iwanter prize for his thesis: *From Comunità to Corporate Autonomy: The Cultural Transformation of Fordist Production at Olivetti*. In the project, Meister explores the impact of American industrial culture on postwar Italy through a study of the typewriter manufacturer Olivetti. The thesis centers on the dialectic between American-style Fordism and the company's president, Adriano Olivetti.



*David Meister,
winner of the 2026 Iwanter Prize*

Meister writes: “The driving force behind the project was my desire to understand in a holistic way how American hegemony transformed Italy after World War II. I found the more narrowly-focused studies on the topic—which only looked at political influence and cultural influence separately—to be helpful but limited.”

He continues: “The breadth of the project pushed me to the limits of my analytical abilities, underscoring the challenges and possibilities of interdisciplinary research. I believe such an approach is absolutely necessary to understand the complexities of modern history.”

Alfred W. McCoy, Harrington Professor of History at UW-Madison, guided Meister's thesis project. In his nomination of Meister for the Iwanter prize, McCoy writes: “In the process of selecting and framing the research topic, [Meister] kept his own counsel and impressed me with the thoughtful way he examined, and discarded, several possible topics, before arriving at what proved to be a promising research proposal that allowed him an opportunity to use primary sources, work in a foreign language, and refine his capacity for critical analysis—all aims for any such undergraduate effort.”



Photo of Adriano Olivetti

“The final product was a superb 50-page thesis that placed an important figure in the intellectual and political context of his times,” McCoy writes.

McCoy also highlights Meister’s intrepid research approach: “Based on a successful research trip to the Olivetti company archives at Ivrea in northern Italy and interviews with retired employees, Meister recovered a rich trove of primary sources, all in Italian, about Mr. Olivetti’s intellectual journey as well as the tempestuous strikes in the company’s factory during Italy’s “hot autumn” of nationwide labor unrest in 1969.”

In fact, as a student at UW-Madison, Meister was “thrilled to find that the history department offered rigorous training in historical methods but also allowed space to take classes in other departments,” including extensive coursework in Spanish and Italian. Meister credits the [UW-Madison Sophomore Research Fellowship](#) for enabling him to travel to conduct original, hands-on research, which made a working command of Italian essential.

“When I arrived as a freshman at UW-Madison, I knew I wanted to study history, but my passion for history has always laid in its ability to explore the diversity of human endeavors,” Meister writes. “This interdisciplinary cocktail has been ideal; historiography continues to be the centerpiece of my intellectual toolkit, but it has been greatly expanded by the structural analysis of economics and the sociocultural possibilities of foreign language study.”

McCoy added that Meister “has the calm demeanor, keen intellect, and articulate communication skills that will make him an effective teacher or an excellent colleague in a graduate school program.”

The Iwanter Prize selection committee found Meister’s project, *From Comunità to Corporate Autonomy: The Cultural Transformation of Fordist Production at Olivetti*, to represent the ideals that the award is intended to recognize: clarity, interdisciplinarity, and scholarly depth.

The committee admired how Meister’s deeply researched and critically sharp scholarship created a nuanced portrait where attention to Olivetti offers an understanding of post-war American hegemony. The narrative remained careful not to overemphasize this power, however, by looking to union activities that don’t align perfectly with American ideology. The writing was clear and measured and provided a sure anchor for the sources that were brought in for evidence and interpretation.

About the Iwanter Prize

The Iwanter Prize itself is about legacy and the passing of intellectual curiosity from one generation to another. The prize was established in 2000 by alumnus Sidney E. Iwanter (B.A. '71, History), a native of the Greenbush neighborhood in Madison. While an undergraduate, Iwanter's own curiosity and will to document the knowledge of the previous generation led him to secretly record the lectures of



*Iwanter in the 1967
Madison Central High
School Yearbook*

Professor of History and political activist Harvey Goldberg. In 2004, Iwanter generously donated these "bootlegs" to UW-Madison (the lectures are available from the [Harvey Goldberg Center](#)). Additionally, the George L. Mosse Program in History conducted [an oral history with Iwanter](#); you can find out more about his childhood in Madison, attendance at UW-Madison, career in Hollywood, and why he set up the Iwanter Prize.

Iwanter, who now lives in Los Angeles, continues to support the undergraduate humanities and the love of learning at UW-Madison, stemming from his belief that, "a well-rounded humanities education is the keystone to an informed electorate and a healthy society."

More information about the Iwanter Prize and past winners can be found at: <https://humanities.wisc.edu/research/iwanter-prize>