



Our Mission

*To strengthen our member businesses and
enhance our community by building business success.*



UW Colleges and
UW-Extension Restructuring

Focus Group Comprehensive Summary

May 18, 2018

Background

In November 2017, the UW System Board of Regents passed a resolution approving the restructure of UW Colleges and UW Extension in efforts to address declining enrollments and financial challenges. Under the approved proposal, UW-Stevens Point would merge with UW-Marathon County and UW-Marshfield/Wood County effective July 1, 2018. The restructure offers an opportunity to set forth an innovative approach to align and connect the deep resources of the comprehensive university to support the needs of central Wisconsin.

The Purpose of the Focus Groups

The Wausau Region Chamber of Commerce held a series of focus group meetings, between February – May 2018, to gather community stakeholder perspectives on the UW Colleges and UW-Extension Restructuring to better understand the current and future needs of central Wisconsin.

Methodology/Data Collection

This section explains the qualitative methods used to solicit the subjective attitudes and beliefs from the various stakeholder groups. A total of (14) focus group activities were conducted lasting approximately (60 – 90) minutes each. David Eckmann, President/CEO of the Wausau Region Chamber of Commerce facilitated focus group meetings with local business representatives and community partners. In addition, high school student focus group meetings were facilitated by chamber staff members that support talent development. The participants were provided an opportunity to communicate openly and freely about their thoughts and opinions. The employees that participated in the focus group meetings included senior leadership and tenured staff members. The students that participated in the focus group meetings included individuals, in the 10th through 12th grade levels, geared toward higher education. The discussions from the focus groups were transcribed, analyzed, and summarized into the unifying themes shared below.

Focus Group Participants - Business and Industry/Community Partners

Approximately (60) total participants

1. UW Foundation Board of Directors
2. Manufacturing Sector
3. Mayor Mielke's Advisory Group
4. Non-profit Organizations
5. Professional Services Sector
6. K12 Education Partners
7. Regional Workforce Development Professionals

Focus Group Participants - High School Students

Approximately (130) total participants

1. Central Wisconsin High School Leadership Program, a program of WIPPS (High school sophomores and juniors are selected to participate in the program from DC Everest Senior High, Marathon High School, Mosinee High School, Wausau East and West High Schools, Northland Lutheran High School, and Newman Catholic High School.)
2. Mosinee High School – Careers-In-Action (CIA) Day (Juniors from Mosinee High School spent the day learning about careers at the Wausau Region Chamber of Commerce)
3. Wausau East High School
4. DC Everest High School
5. Wausau West High School
6. Mosinee High School
7. Athens High School

Intended Results

By the end of the analysis of our data, we intend to:

1. Understand the basic needs and values of area business and industry.
2. Understand the basic needs and values of community partners.
3. Understand the basic needs and values of prospective future student consumers.
4. Share a report of findings with community stakeholders.

Key Findings - Business and Industry/Community Partners

QUESTION 1

When considering all of the factors that influence a student's decision on where to attend college, what "specific features" could this institution (UWMC) offer to differentiate itself from other higher education options and become a top college of choice?

What we heard:

Academic Alignment of Programs/ Flexible Delivery Methods

The institution needs to be more responsive and nimble with programs and course delivery options.

- Must strengthen program alignment to business and industry and the commitment to regional workforce development
- Offer baccalaureate degree completion programs to increase degree attainment and align with regional industry sectors
- Upskill talent through continuous learning and career pathways
- Offer flexible learning options (hybrid, distant learning, accelerated programs, etc.)
- Develop collaborative / specialized degree options with other institutions
- Incorporate applied learning experiences into liberal arts education
- Enhance the liberal arts experience to retain soft skill development (leadership, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, etc.)
- Connect students to the area through internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships as a means of retaining talent

Vibrant Campus Life

The institution needs to invest resources to revitalize and enhance the quality of campus life.

- Improved facility aesthetics
- Upgraded technology
- New or improved student housing or dorms to promote independence
- Add inviting mixed-use spaces where students can eat, socialize, network, study, and relax
- Develop student clubs and collegiate sports to enrich the college experience

Value proposition/competitive advantage/differentiation

The institution needs to develop a niche value proposition to set their brand apart in today's competitive landscape. Some of the distinct benefits of the institution that were referenced include:

- Small class sizes and access to strong professors
- Quality academic advising and career planning
- Challenging academics in a nurturing environment
- Faculty & staff that are engaged in the community

Access / Affordability

The institution should maintain an affordable and accessible option for students and families.

- Known for Guaranteed Transfer Program, start here – go anywhere in the UW-System
- Accessible education provides a solid foundation for a successful future

QUESTION 2

Let's imagine it is now the year 2028. The economic and workforce needs have changed significantly over the last 10 years. What is the institution's role in preparing students for the evolving labor market and future employment opportunities?

What we heard:

Program Alignment to Labor Market

The institution needs to strengthen program alignment to business & industry and the commitment to regional workforce development.

- Offer baccalaureate degree completion programs to increase degree attainment and align with regional industry sectors
- Upskill talent through continuous learning and career pathways
- Develop collaborative / specialized educational options with other institutions
- Enhance the liberal arts experience to retain soft skill development (leadership, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, etc.)
- Connect students to the area through internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships as a means of retaining talent
- Embrace and employ innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence, data science, etc.

QUESTION 3

What civic engagement initiatives, or community outreach efforts, must remain intact or be developed in order to preserve the institution's relevance in the community?

What we heard:

Community Development / Civic Engagement

The institution should play a key role in community development and civic engagement.

- Become more actively engaged in the community
- Bring the relevance of the institution to help address community social issues
- Maintain WIPPS, STEAM, EATS programs
- Offer lifelong learning opportunities and enhance cultural experiences (speakers series, arts and theater, music, sports venues, etc.)

QUESTION 4

What efforts can be made to strengthen the relationship between the institution and the local business community?

What we heard:

Program Alignment

The institution must strengthen program alignment to business & industry and the commitment to regional workforce development.

- Connect students to the area through internships, co-ops, apprenticeships, etc.
- Upskill talent through continuous learning and career pathways
- Make it easy for businesses to access resources offered by the institution
- Strengthen relationships with area K12s and post-secondary institutions
- Foster pipeline activities
- Develop and maintain business advisory groups
- Dedicate personnel focused on community outreach efforts and college promotion
- Outreach should extend beyond city limits and include rural communities
- The institution (as a whole) needs to be actively engaged in the community
- Faculty needs to be engaged in business and industry needs

QUESTION 5

Understanding the institution may see a name change in the future, what factors should be taken into consideration in determining a new name?

What we heard:

Consideration of Institution's Name

- Name should be in alignment with the institution's mission
- Name should embrace the values of the target audience or consumer
- Name should identify the institution's value proposition and competitive advantage over competition
- Name should reference the recognition of geographic location city rather than county
- Name should capitalize on strength of the UW brand

Key Findings - High School Students

The high school student focus group discussions centered around specific factors that may (positively or negatively) influence a student's decision to attend college at Northcentral Technical College, University of Wisconsin – Marathon County, or University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point.

What we heard:

Affordability

- Affordability is the top priority for most students
- Tuition costs are a barrier for several students and inhibits educational opportunities
- Many students expect to pay for their own education
- Most students are concerned about obtaining student loan debt
- Students lack a general awareness of available financial aid resources
- Several students indicated that they would prefer to live at home with their parents to save money rather than pay for room and board
- Students are taking advantage of opportunities to earn credits in high school to save money (such as dual credit classes)

Reputation of local public college options

The reputations of Northcentral Technical College, University of Wisconsin – Marathon County, and the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point were described as the following:

Pros

- Hands on experiences
- Affordable education
- Quality / effective education
- Strong transferability
- Strong academic rigor
- Small classes
- Access to instructors
- NTC has new and affordable suites
- Dual credit options at NTC

Cons

- Lack of knowledge and awareness of UWMC
- Not as “prestigious” as other education options, poor reputations, stigmas
- Same experience as parents
- Too close to home
- Students desire new experiences
- Viewed as a last resort, or fall back option
- High acceptance rate, too easy to get into
- Lacks campus safety resources
- UWSP and UWMC have smaller dorms – unappealing

Campus Life / Student Housing / Athletic Programs / Extracurricular Activities

- Most students' expectation of “college” primarily revolves around branching out, new experiences, and meeting new people
- Students desire autonomy and independence
- Students desire a “community feel” on college campuses with an organized and efficient layout
- Affordable housing is important
- Students are interested in extracurricular activities (such as clubs and sports) as a means of meeting people with common interests
- Colleges should promote campus events and provide resources for students to get involved and to know what's going on through social media, etc.

Location / College Size / City Vibrancy:

- Location and college size preferences range significantly
- Students desire more affordable and accessible entertainment / recreational options
- Current entertainment / recreational opportunities for high school students include:
 - “Big sits” in local parking lots
 - Going to Walmart
 - Half-price appetizers at Applebees
 - Eating at Briqs or Subway
 - Going to the movies, however it is difficult to get across town
 - Going to WOW-Wausau on the Water; however, it is expensive
- The Wausau region needs to improve its reputation, Wausau is considered “gross and dirty”
- Stevens Point is recognized as having more “options” than Wausau; however, not as many opportunities as other college towns
- Local colleges can do a better job of promoting events to high school students

Academic Programs / Majors / Education Type

- A student's college preference is often based on the institution's reputation of their desired field of study or program interest
- Most students are interested in pursuing high-demand career fields (STEM programs, Nursing / Medical field, advanced manufacturing, trades, etc.)
- Most students believe that more prestigious colleges provide a higher quality of education and superior outcomes upon degree completion
- Students value the opportunity to gain (in field) work experience as soon as possible