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Guest column: Engineering program answers area need

By Brad Hansen • April 16, 2009

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Mark Guard could have been one of many jobless workers included in Green Bay's 11.9 percent unemployment rate. Thanks in part to a pioneering collaboration between the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley in Menasha and UW-Platteville, Guard is a well-paid engineer at Schneider National Inc.

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When Guard had to leave his 20-year career as an automotive transmission technician for health reasons, the service jobs he was offered paid about a third of his previous salary. The ABET-accredited bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering program offered by UW-Platteville entirely on the two-year UW-Fox Valley campus in Menasha allowed Guard to earn his degree without moving his family.

Engineers, by developing products and improving business and manufacturing processes, give companies the competitive edge needed to successfully compete in the global market. College-educated workers, including engineers, can help expand and attract new businesses and contribute tax dollars.

A dozen years ago, UW-Fox Valley Campus Executive Officer and Dean Jim Perry and I talked with business leaders who were questioning the financial wisdom of keeping their companies in Wisconsin because of the lack of workers with an engineering bachelor's degree. At the same time, we heard from workers who wanted to continue their engineering education, but could not leave the Fox Valley because of family and employment responsibilities. In fall 2002 our effort to match Wisconsin residents' need for accessible educational opportunities and businesses' need for degreed workers debuted on the UW-Fox

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Valley campus as the UW-Platteville/UW Colleges Collaborative Engineering Program.

All 35 graduates of the program have been hired, with 34 landing jobs within 100 miles of the UW-Fox Valley campus. Currently approximately 275 students at UW-Fox Valley, UW-Marathon County (Wausau), UW-Marquette and UW-Rock County (Janesville) are enrolled in baccalaureate engineering courses delivered through locally based faculty, mobile labs and online instruction.

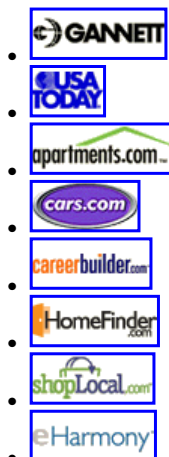
UW-Platteville and UW Colleges' plan to expand this innovative program to UW-Sheboygan and UW-Washington County (West Bend) is on hold because of lack of state support.

I join business and community leaders throughout the state in urging the state Legislature to redirect funding to the UW-Platteville/UW Colleges Collaborative Engineering Program in the 2009-11 state budget.

Brad Hansen is president of Heartland Business Systems and Avastone Technologies in Little Chute and vice president of the UW Colleges and UW-Extension Board of Visitors.

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