

UW-Stout: State's economic development leader impressed with university's industry focus

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Menomonie, Wis. — The secretary and CEO of the [Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation](#) recently saw and heard how the University of Wisconsin-Stout is helping the state move forward.

Missy Hughes toured four labs with Chancellor Katherine Frank, Menomonie Mayor Randy Knaack and other school and city officials. She learned how UW-Stout thinks beyond the classroom as it helps meet Wisconsin's needs and prepares students for impactful careers.

"UW-Stout is doing a great job of facilitating a connection between employers and students while working with businesses to ensure those students are set up for success after graduation," Hughes said following the visit.

She heard, for example, how the university's [Manufacturing Outreach Center](#) is collaborating with students in the [School of Art and Design](#) to create animated videos for industry-standard Lean training. The online training modules will greatly streamline the process for workers in manufacturing and other industries in Wisconsin.

While visiting several labs for the [packaging major](#), Hughes learned that a course was added recently to the major to address the demand for graduates in the growing medical products field. The change was in response to advice from professionals who serve on the program's advisory committee.

"It's neat to see the amount of collaboration between the university and industries to ensure that educational programs are up-to-date and meeting the current workforce demands while also proactively preparing for the future," Hughes said.

Each academic program at UW-Stout works with an advisory committee made up of professionals in that field to keep the program current with industry needs and trends.

"As Wisconsin's Polytechnic University, we connect with business and industry to solve real world problems, and as a result, we create meaningful applied learning experiences our students translate into success in their careers. I am pleased we had the opportunity to demonstrate Stout's distinctiveness during Secretary Hughes' visit," Frank said.

Hughes also visited the university's [Discovery Center Fab Lab](#), a high-tech prototyping space open to students across all majors and open to business and industry; the [plastics engineering](#) lab, where students train on industry-standard machines thanks to close ties with manufacturers; and the motion capture studio in the School of Art and Design.

Plastics, art and design, packaging

In the plastics engineering lab, Hughes watched student Jared Pavlis, a senior from

Lino Lakes, Minn., operate a nearly new injection molding machine the size of a pickup truck. The machine, on loan from industry partner Engel, applied 32 tons of pressure to produce parts for a catheter in the medical industry.

Professor Wei Zheng explained how the program, ranked one of the best in the U.S., works closely with industry, such as [Phillips-Medisize](#) which has a plant in the [Stout Technology and Business Park](#) in Menomonie. Graduates have an average starting salary of \$66,000 with 100% employment.

“The plastics engineering program is extremely responsive to industry,” said Randy Hulke, Discovery Center executive director.

Associate Professor Andrew Williams noted that art and design students use the motion capture studio to work with industry partners on projects, including Wisconsin-based companies Trek and Kohler, as well as with university athletes and the university’s [health, wellness and fitness](#) majors.

“This is the most advanced motion capture system in this region of the country,” Williams said.

In the packaging labs, Associate Professor Robert Meisner explained the high demand for graduates, noting that every product needs a package and often at several stages. Testing facilities allow students to replicate challenges within the industry, such as how much weight a package can bear and the properties of various materials.

Packaging students also work directly with companies. “We’re solving real problems with industry, such as with Milwaukee Tool,” Meisner said.

Recent donations to improve packaging lab and course offerings have come from [Boston Scientific](#), [Great Northern Corp.](#), and [Prent Corp.](#)

Opportunities in Wisconsin

Hughes was pleased to see the university programs addressing workforce needs and industry solutions, one of the goals of the UW System.

UW-Stout's [FOCUS2030](#) strategic plan includes providing students access to cutting edge technology, innovative programs and collaborative partnerships. In 2021, [CollegeValuesOnline](#) ranked UW-Stout No. 26 in the U.S. for its ties to business and industry and how those ties benefit students.

"Higher education and economic development are inextricably related and have been throughout Wisconsin's history," Hughes said. "The University of Wisconsin is one of the economic engines of our state: it educates our workforce, undertakes research that benefits our industries from biohealth and technology to advanced manufacturing and food and beverage production."

Now is a great time to be working toward a college degree in Wisconsin, Hughes said.

"The career opportunities in Wisconsin are immense. It's really a seller's market for workers. In every corner of the state, we're seeing new businesses starting up and adding new vitality to communities, whether they're rural or urban. Many of these jobs require the kind of skills and knowledge that the UW provides, so there's often a seamless transition from college into careers," Hughes said.

“Wisconsin’s economy is on the right track because of the strategic investments we’ve made in education, infrastructure and our communities over the past few years. We’re seeing those investments pay off, and it’s a great time for young people to be entering the job market,” Hughes added.

UW-Stout, which takes pride in a long-standing [employment rate](#) above 97% for recent graduates, will hold its [Spring Career Conference](#), one of the largest in the Midwest, beginning Feb. 28.

UW-Stout is [Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University](#), with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes.