

# **UW-Stout: University's business, industry connections highlighted during visit from System President Rothman**

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With low unemployment and an ongoing shortage of qualified workers, business and industry need a stronger talent pipeline to keep the Wisconsin economic engine running at full speed.

The UW System stands ready and willing to help. That's the message new System President Jay Rothman communicated July 27 during a stakeholder meeting of area business and industry professionals, part of a daylong visit to University of Wisconsin-Stout.

"We are in a war for talent right now. We need more people with four-year degrees and graduate degrees in order for us to be successful and in order for businesses like yours to continue to invest in the state. If we don't have the talent in the state, the investment is going to go out of state," Rothman said.

Rothman recently began work as the UW System's ninth president. He has been visiting each campus this summer to meet with leaders and familiarize himself with each school's mission.

At UW-Stout, Wisconsin's Polytechnic University, he learned more about the university's close ties with business and industry, which drive the 47 undergraduate and 23 Graduate School programs.

"Across the System, there's an opportunity to develop stronger relationships with

business and industry. This is a good example of how it gets done,” he said of UW-Stout.

The panel of 15 professionals, with Chancellor Katherine Frank, explained to Rothman how their companies and institutions work closely with the university to offer co-ops and internships; serve on academic program advisory committees to keep curriculum and technology current; and recruit at the spring and fall Career Conferences, which are among the largest in the Midwest.

Rothman said the UW System’s support of the state’s economy also goes beyond producing talented graduates. “Upskilling” opportunities via certification programs are vital to help train and retrain workers as technology changes, along with degree completion programs for workers who have college credits and/or an associate degree, all in conjunction with expanding online learning options.

“We need to position ourselves in the System to deliver on that,” Rothman said. “I can see it being developed here and being shared with the rest of the state.”

He cited UW-Stout’s recent student-led project, [Buzz Digital](#), involving [game design and development](#) students. They created a Lean training simulation to help midsize manufacturers via the university’s Manufacturing Outreach Center, a NIST-Manufacturing Extension Partnership center in operation at UW-Stout since 1994. Manufacturing is one of the drivers of Wisconsin’s economy.

### **Graduates who are ready**

UW-Stout emphasizes the need for triple threat graduates — a degree, experiential learning such as a co-op, internship or research experience, and a professional certification — who are ready to contribute to the workplace on day one.

Hiring interns from UW-Stout’s construction program has worked well for [Market & Johnson](#), an Eau Claire-based building contractor. Often, the interns become full-time employees. “We know exactly what we’re getting, and they’re hitting the ground running,” said Project Executive Tyler Swanson, a UW-Stout alum.

Applied learning with real-world applications is part of UW-Stout’s DNA as a polytechnic. “I love the pairing of lecture and lab; that’s what sets Stout apart,” said Jen Parker, rotational program manager at [Phillips-Medisize](#).

Buckley Brinkman, executive director and CEO of the [Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing and Productivity](#), sees value in the university's mission.

"One of the things I appreciate about Stout is everything that happens on campus has a direct line to something that happens in the real world. That's very apparent when you react with faculty and students," Brinkman said. "Stout forms that bridge between what's going on in academia and what can actually be applied in industry."

Provost Glendali Rodriguez cited an ongoing [partnership with Great Northern Corp.](#), based in Appleton. The packaging solutions company is sponsoring a cross-disciplinary course for [graphic design](#) and [packaging](#) majors.

"We want to do more of that, and I'm hoping that we can. Bringing real projects into the classroom is a priority for Stout and part of our FOCUS2030 goals," she said.

[EVCO Plastics](#), based in DeForest, has doubled its workforce in the past 4½ years to more than 1,900 employees. "You don't do that without talent," said CEO and Chairman Dale Evans, an alum.

"We love people who are not afraid to get their hands dirty — never stop learning, never stop training. A lot of UW-Stout grads fit into that mode really well," Evans said.

Pete Hayda, managing director of Sales and Marketing for [The Little Nell Hotel Group](#) based in Colorado, suggested that universities offer more classes and lectures taught virtually by professionals and that they should partner with companies to pay for new labs, both of which UW-Stout has done and plans to expand.

"There are special things we could work on," said Hayda, an alum of UW-Stout's [hotel, restaurant and tourism management](#) program.

Hayda praised the work ethic of students from the Upper Midwest and UW-Stout, a thought echoed by Bob Schultz, community Service Manager for [Xcel Energy](#).

"We're looking for the person who is a good leader out of the gate, with communication skills, problem-solving skills and is a critical thinker. UW-Stout wouldn't have a 98% employment rate for decades if graduates didn't have those things," said Schultz, also an alum.

Chancellor Frank expressed to the group that “these partnerships are critical to how we educate at Stout. We depend on each other to make sure what we do is relevant and that we are listening to what’s most important in business and industry sectors.”

During his visit, Rothman also attended a planning and design meeting for the prioritized Heritage Hall renovation project; had lunch with community leaders and state Rep. Rob Summerfield; toured campus, including stops in Heritage Hall, the game design lab, plastics engineering lab and Sports and Fitness Center, currently in the planning and design stage for future renovation; met with leaders of the Stout Student Association, Faculty Senate, Academic Staff Senate and University Staff Senate; met with the chancellor and the chancellor’s cabinet; and met with Rodriguez and her Provost’s Office leadership team.

The stakeholder event attendees were:

- Jenny Benrud, executive director of operations, Prevea
- Brian Binczak, value stream manager, 3M
- Buckley Brinkman, executive director and CEO, Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing and Productivity
- Jeff Buhandt, interim vice president of University Relations, UW System
- Dale Evans, chairman and CEO, EVCO
- Pete Hayda, managing director of sales and marketing, The Little Nell Hotel Group
- Seth Hudson, director of Economic Development Services, Cedar Corp.
- Pete Koenig, engineering manager, Nolato Contour
- Stanley Lichuki, plant manager, Andersen Windows
- Rob Martineau, engineering manager, Andersen Windows
- Justin Oleson, general manager, Menomonie Fastenal
- Jen Parker, rotational program manager, Phillips-Medisize
- Glendali Rodriguez, provost, UW-Stout
- Bob Schultz, community service manager, Xcel Energy
- Tyler Swanson, project executive, Market & Johnson