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The Constant in Change: Local Access to Higher Education

UW-Fond du Lac is celebrating 50 years of simultaneous stability and change.

Since its founding in 1968, the location has been a solid site for higher education, leading generations of students to develop in knowledge, ability and character while earning an associate's degree. The school itself has gone through multiple iterations of governance and leadership structure, culminating this year in rejoining the nearby comprehensive campus it originally hailed from, as the University of Wisconsin-Fond du Lac, a UW Oshkosh campus.

The mission of providing local access to higher education remains unchanged.

Golden Campus

Several hundred people—alumni and current students, retired and current faculty, administrators, county board members, and appreciative community citizens—gathered in the Campus Commons to officially celebrate the golden anniversary of the site and its mission on the evening of Friday, Nov. 2. The Commons glowed in party lighting, encircled in memorabilia from five decades of academics and student life. Alumni who began their music education on the Fond du Lac Campus—Eddie Uttendorfer, Victoria Mayes, and members of the performing Thelen Family—provided musical entertainment before and during a program that featured remarks from a broad palette of education and community leaders and culminated in a campus tour, all in a celebratory atmosphere of food and conversation.

“Our 50th anniversary represents 50 years of forward thinking, 50 years of constantly imagining and realizing the future of an education in our community,” said Assistant Chancellor for Access Campuses Martin Rudd. “The presence of the university, housed in this campus district, has had a major effect on the quality of life in our county, and beyond, but as with many projects, it started with humble beginnings and the ironclad will of determined local individuals who clamored for a new University of Wisconsin campus to be built here....it is a testament to the incredible leaders who came before me that we have thrived in our open access, locally based, community serving role.”

Community Connection

Rudd outlined the unique and strong relationship of the university and the physical campus: while campus university employees are supported by the state, the facility and grounds are owned and operated in an agreement between the Board of Regents and Fond du Lac County.

State dollars do not remodel, build or keep up facilities; instead, the infrastructure of the campus has been built and continues to be funded by the county, through the unflagging support of County Executive Allen Buechel and elected Fond du Lac County Board Supervisors. Buechel noted to the group that the county has invested more money in education than in jails.

UW Oshkosh Chancellor Andy Leavitt reminded attendees of the long-standing relationship between Oshkosh and Fond du Lac, including founding Dean Willard (Bill) Henken's Oshkosh alumnus and faculty status. "Here is what is still the strongest connection between then and now," Leavitt said. "Back then the idea, the spirit was 'local.' Today, it's 'local' once again...a half century ago, leaders pondered the question, 'What kind of university does this community need and deserve?' Fifty years later, I challenge us all to consider that same question. The timing is poetic; in fact, it's perfect....We commit to help transform more lives. And, once again, we will do it together."

UW-Fond du Lac Foundation Executive Director Barb Senn did a quick tally of the near-dozen personal family members and friends who began their education on the campus, scanned the room and noted Distinguished Alumni Award winners in attendance, and asked all current and former students to raise their hands: Arms throughout the room shot skyward. She noted how Foundation donations go directly back into the university through scholarships, and encouraged all those with a connection to the campus to consider a simple gift this year: \$50 for 50 years, to support a continuing local campus with local dollars.

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Change is a Constant: UW-Fond du Lac Timeline in Wisconsin Higher Education History

1848—University of Wisconsin created by state constitution; classes begin 1849

1866—The first of eight Normal Schools (teachers college) opens in Platteville

1926—Normal Schools are renamed Teachers Colleges and offer four years of education

1940s—University of Wisconsin opens freshman-sophomore centers across the state

1950s—University of Wisconsin-Madison operates an extension campus in Fond du Lac

1951—The State Teachers colleges (including the Oshkosh campus) are renamed Wisconsin State Colleges (later, Wisconsin State Universities) and offer full, four-year liberal arts degrees

1968—Wisconsin State-Oshkosh opens a satellite campus "center" in Fond du Lac, on a gift of land from the Fond du Lac County Board, led by Dean Willard Henken, Ph.D.

1971—The Wisconsin State Universities system (including the Oshkosh campus) merges with the University of Wisconsin system under a single Board of Regents to create a system with 13 universities, 14 freshman-sophomore centers/colleges, and a statewide extension with offices in all 72 counties

1972—UW-Fond du Lac becomes an independent two-year campus

1999—UW-Fond du Lac completes major campus improvements and experiences a “rebirth”

2005—UW-Colleges and UW-Extension share common administration, maintain separate provosts and identities.

2017—UW-System President Raymond Cross suggests, and the Board of Regents approves, system restructuring to bring the UW-Colleges campuses under the control of their nearest comprehensive university, creating regional campuses

July 2018—UW-Fond du Lac becomes University of Wisconsin-Fond du Lac, a UW Oshkosh campus

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