

Chancellor Emeritus Penson still champions higher ed

by Sheryl Hanson - Friday, August 29, 2008

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Edward M. Penson doesn't believe in retirement. He still works about 48 hours a week, and he doesn't plan to stop working anytime soon.

At 81, the former UW Oshkosh Chancellor (1978-1989) won't use age as an excuse to slow down, largely due to an experience he had as a 15-year-old baseball player in Miami.

"Midway through the season, the 16- to 18-year-old league invited me to join them. Because that would make me the youngest player in the big guys' league, I was a little hesitant," Penson said.

His dad responded with a quote that Penson remembers word for word: "What does age have to do with it? If you believe you can do it, then do it! Pay no attention to chronological age."

More than 65 years later, he still is taking his dad's advice.

Penson announced his retirement from UW Oshkosh in 1989 because he was turning 62, which was the mandatory retirement age for UW System chancellors at the time.

However, the UW System Board of Regents had other ideas. They voted unanimously in executive session to allow Penson to remain as chancellor past the mandatory retirement age, but it was too late. He already had made commitments to the clients of his consulting firm, Penson Associates.

Penson followed through with his retirement plans and moved to Tallahassee. Since then, he and his associates have accumulated an impressive list of more than 400 clients in every state except Hawaii. Most are university presidents, chancellors and university system executives.

Some call it "coaching" or "mentoring," but Penson describes his work as "assistive conferring," since he and his clients explore options together, construct new solutions. Ultimately, the client makes the decisions.

Penson spent the 16 years following his UW Oshkosh retirement traveling nearly every week. But after 9/11, he decided to reduce the travel to a minimum to avoid the headaches of heightened security.

"I thought that would mean retirement," he said, laughing. "But what happened is my clients were willing to confer with me over the phone. They also visit occasionally, and we work here at my home."

Penson's team consists of 14 other associates, each boasting a lengthy record of service and excellence in higher education. Much of Penson Associates' work involves strategic planning, university president succession management, board orientations and development, reviews of presidents and their teams, team alignment, crisis management and mediation.

Penson values the countless relationships he has formed with higher education leaders throughout the country.

“We were competitors at one time, but now we are friends,” he said. “It’s pretty neat.”

Penson remembers his days in Oshkosh very fondly. In addition to his University commitments, he enjoyed 10 years of board service for the Chamco, Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce and Valley Bank (now M&I Bank). He also recruited new business to Oshkosh, working with the city manager, and facilitated strategic planning for 150 area small businesses.

One of his favorite roles, which involved wearing both his University and community hats, was fostering partnerships with businesses and governments throughout the Fox Valley region. These partnerships were the beginning of the Center for Community Partnerships, which then was called the UW Oshkosh Technical Development Center.

“I still feel very great affection for UW Oshkosh,” Penson said. “Often I am reminded of the good people I worked with there. Many of my colleagues at UW Oshkosh were the most effective people I have found anywhere. Students who are now alumni still get in touch from time to time. It is exciting to hear them talk about their accomplishments.”

A closer look

Name: Edward M. Penson

Service: UW Oshkosh Chancellor, 1978-1989

Age: 81

Where he lives today: Tallahassee, Fla.

Current affiliation: General chairman and senior scholar of [Penson Associates Inc.](#), a consulting firm that provides services to universities, colleges, university systems, health-related organizations and not-for-profit enterprises.

University accomplishments:

- Raising the bar in teaching, scholarship and quality of students at UW Oshkosh. Under his leadership, the University changed its enrollment policy, attracting more high-caliber students.
- Bringing National Merit Scholars to UW Oshkosh. In 1986, UW Oshkosh attracted 23 merit scholars — more than UW Madison that year.
- Raising student applications 45 percent, from 3,610 in 1979-80 to 5,235 in 1988-89.
- Beginning the first automated (phone) registration in the UW System in 1988.

- Instituting the annual recognition of teaching excellence by developing the John McNaughton Rosebush Distinguished Professorship.
- Establishing the Outstanding Teaching Award and the Academic Staff Award.
- Leading UW Oshkosh to reaccreditation with no recommendations in 1987. The campus later spent three years as a national model in the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA).
- Initiating the Edward M. Penson Award, which recognizes full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty who have a record of excellence in teaching, scholarship or service to the University.

This is the first in a series of articles featuring former UW Oshkosh chancellors. Part 2 will highlight how John E. Kerrigan (1990-2000) continues to build bridges for higher education.