

## **Pilot program to help increase degree holders in U.S.**

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/2581/pilot-program-to-help-increase-number-of-degree-holders-in-us/>

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh will introduce the second phase of its highly successful, ground-breaking Graduation Project, which is designed to increase the number of bachelor's degree holders in the region and beyond. The phase-two pilot program will support the national call from business, educational and political leaders to dramatically increase the number of degree holders in the United States by 2025.

The program will provide UW Oshkosh students in good academic standing who "stopped out" with 45-89 credits or more the opportunity to complete an Associate of Arts degree. The University, which has the authority to grant associate degrees for students who meet specific criteria, sees the degree as a logical progression in helping those students continue to work toward a bachelor's degree. The Graduation Project, launched in 2004 and one of the pioneers in the nation, offers special support to students who have earned 90-plus credits and whose progress at the University was interrupted by more than one semester.

"This is a natural next step for the Graduation Project, a nationally recognized outreach program that provides customized solutions to former UW Oshkosh students who were not able to complete their degrees but remain in good academic standing," said Ruth Freiburger, director of the University's Adult Nontraditional Student Resource Office. Since its launch in 2004, the Graduation Project already has helped 158 stop out students complete their bachelor's degrees. Meanwhile, more than 200 students are being served by the program, and 55 are on schedule to graduate in spring 2010.

Students in good academic standing occasionally leave higher education due to personal circumstances, such as financial problems, illness, or other obligations or family issues. "This is an opportunity to provide residents of northeastern Wisconsin's New North and beyond with a credential that has been earned and the incentive to continue to pursue a bachelor's degree," said Chancellor Richard H. Wells.

"There are many benefits to obtaining a post-secondary degree," Wells added. "National statistics show that associate degree holders have a 3 percent higher employment rate than high school graduates and make roughly \$12,000 a year more. Meanwhile, bachelor's degree holders earn approximately \$14,000 a year more than associate degree holders and have a 5 percent higher employment rate than high school graduates."

### **Students feel relief**

Marie Gumz, who was a student at UW Oshkosh from 2006-2009, said she was relieved to hear she was eligible for the associate degree. She stopped out after she married a Marine and moved to Virginia; the pair will be moving to Japan in June.

"It makes me feel like I accomplished something after three years of work," she said. "I think having an associate degree will make it a lot easier for me to get my baccalaureate degree in the future and help me

find a job in Japan and when I return to Wisconsin.”

Gumz added that she was happy the University made the effort to reach out to her, noting that she didn't realize getting an associate degree was even a possibility. Donald Rideout, who stopped out in 2008 due to financial hardships, felt the same. He said he was pleased to have found out he had taken the necessary requirements to earn an associate degree.

Rideout, who will return in the fall to pursue a mathematics education major, said “It helps to have an associate degree. It feels good.”

UW Oshkosh staff examined the records of 2,105 students who stopped out between 2003 and 2009. They removed 430 students because they were not in good standing with the University. The staff then sent the remaining 1,675 names to the National Student Clearinghouse's StudentTracker database, which determined that 957 of them transferred to another institution, with 417 continuing on to earn a degree. The remaining 718 students already have been contacted by UW Oshkosh staff.

The University estimates as many as 200 of those 718 former students may be within one or two courses from meeting the requirements to receive an associate degree. Seventeen of these former students already have met all the requirements and will be given the opportunity to receive the earned degree as early as June 2010.

Further analysis could determine that others have met the necessary requirements by taking classes at other institutions or by having classes that can be substituted. The registrar and staff in the Adult Nontraditional Student Resource office will work closely with faculty and academic advisers to help students fulfill requirements so they can receive the degree they have earned.

Additionally, the Registrar's Office is working proactively to ensure that students who stop out understand they may have the option of receiving an associate degree.

“We will be working to identify students who have, are or will be stopping out to help them determine if they have completed the necessary credits to earn an associate degree,” said Registrar Lisa Danielson. “It's important that those students understand their options before they leave the institution.”

### **Similar programs could yield thousands of new degree holders**

Meanwhile, the University hopes its pilot program becomes a national model.

“Based on our experience and in consultation with UW System, we estimate that there may be at least 13,000 UW System students in just the past six years who have stopped out with 45-89 credits and who are in good academic standing,” Wells said. “If you extrapolate those numbers — which don't even include technical college and private college students — there are likely hundreds of thousands or more stop out students across the nation that would be within a few credits of an associate degree. Reaching back beyond six years would dramatically increase the number of eligible students in the state and nation.”

“If more colleges reached out to ‘stop out’ students, they'd be more likely to come back to finish their degrees,” said Kevin Reilly, president of the UW System. “I am pleased that UW Oshkosh has initiated

this pilot project; I hope this model is replicated across UW System.”

While the U.S. ranks first for bachelor’s degree attainment for adults, except in the 25-34 age category, many other countries have a much higher attainment rate for associate degrees and certificates. Therefore, the United States ranks 10th out of the 30 industrialized nations for post-secondary degree attainment.

“Because of the different structure of the U.S. higher education system, many people do not earn associate degrees because they opt to pursue a bachelor’s degree but may be unable to complete their education due to a variety of reasons,” Wells said. “Programs such as the Graduation Project are designed to help those students receive what they have earned — in this case an associate degree — and offer incentives to continue pursuing their bachelor’s degree.”

A Web site [www.uwosh.edu/go/associate](http://www.uwosh.edu/go/associate) and helpline (920) 424-4474 have been created to provide additional details. Former UW Oshkosh students who left the University prior to 2003 and believe they may fit the criteria are encouraged to register their interest.

This program represents another example of how the University has aligned itself to respond to the educational, economic, healthcare and leadership needs in the New North region and beyond while also working to ensure that a high-quality education is affordable and accessible.

- To read about other ways the University has worked to become more aligned with the needs of the region, visit [www.uwosh.edu/today/?p=1781](http://www.uwosh.edu/today/?p=1781).
- To read about the latest major at UW Oshkosh, visit [www.uwosh.edu/today/?p=2501](http://www.uwosh.edu/today/?p=2501).