

There's no graduation without graduation examiners

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/30917/theres-no-graduation-without-graduation-examiners/>

The mortarboard caps, the gowns and cords, the thousands of graduates, the families--all the pomp and circumstance--would be nothing were it not for a small corps of University of Wisconsin Oshkosh staff members tucked into the offices of the Registrar and Graduate Studies.

These quality-controllers represent the four-person team whose job it is to ensure each and every graduate from the state's third-largest institution has negotiated every necessary curve in his or her educational journey, amassing the proper number and kinds of quality credits to earn a degree and, ultimately, a place in that hallowed Commencement line-up.

They proof name-spellings. They ensure the proverbial "Is" are dotted and "Ts" are crossed.

There would be no graduation without graduation examiners.

"We're already working on spring," said Sharon Hybke, examiner for the UW Oshkosh College of Education and Human Services, a week before UW Oshkosh's [Midyear Commencement on Dec. 14](#).

"And summer," said Julie Kumbier, Hybke's counterpart for the Colleges of Nursing, Business and UW Oshkosh's Division of Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement.

Add graduation examiner Jane Kramer (responsible for the College of Letters and Science) and Connie Schuster, admissions and records processing coordinator for the office of Graduate Studies, and you have the four-person team that serves as 1,700-employee UW Oshkosh's final Commencement checkpoint. Combined, these colleagues represent more than 75 years of experience at UW Oshkosh, with nearly 20 of those years in their examiner roles.

In the 2012-13 academic year, the team of UW Oshkosh employees rigorously inspected applications and educational records and gave final go-ahead so that a record 2,274 degrees could be awarded.

"Someone said to me today, 'Oh, now that graduation is coming up I imagine you're really busy,'" Kumbier said. "... I said, 'As opposed to what other time?' I said, 'You don't understand, this is a constant process.'"

And how.

UW Oshkosh's student population has grown from approximately 11,700 students in 2000 to more than 13,720 in fall 2013. With the surge comes more graduates and the need to thoroughly inspect student records to ensure each and every person applying for graduation has earned the necessary credits and met requirements. That means graduation examiners dig into each student's Student Academic Report (STAR).

“It’s three positions doing this (for undergraduates), and I’ve looked back between when I started seven years ago and last spring--we had 300 more students in a given year,” Kramer said. “Each student (review) isn’t done in a few minutes. It’s a challenge.”

If students have a complete and approved STAR, they are a go. If not, the graduation examiners do all they can to help students reconnect with advisers, faculty or other members of the campus community to meet any unfulfilled obligations.

“We have enough safety nets,” Schuster said, adding that the communication process to alert outbound students of the graduation process begins, for Midyear Commencement, early in the fall term.

Each examiner’s student-by-student reviews are critical and not just for prospective graduates. Ensuring all benchmarks and requirements have been met to earn a degree is a must to preserve integrity and UW Oshkosh’s accreditation.

“We can point them in the right direction,” Kramer said. “Most of the fixes have to come from UARC (Undergraduate Academic Resource Center) or the department their major is in. Once we get to this time of year, we also prepare the draft that becomes the commencement program.”

Kramer, Hybke and Kumbier also help coordinate “Countdown to Commencement,” the once-a-semester program that welcomes pending graduates to verify all the hurdles have been cleared, their names are on official graduation lists and, last but not least, their names are spelled correctly.

“There are times a student will call or be in a panic because they are short of credits,” Hybke said. “There are times students have left here, and I have assured them that they are going to be okay. We’ll get a modification done... It’s a good feeling.”

Not always an easy thing to live through the stress of close calls when students aiming to exit with their degrees in hand fear they may come up short on credits.

There are weeks after Commencement for UW Oshkosh students to tie up loose ends and make sure they’ve cleared the final marks before the final deadlines. Grades come in later. Some classes that take place off campus may experience data delays. The examiners help students work with advisers and faculty to make sure legit modifications are made, information is filed and what can be corrected is corrected.

One thing is clear and consistent with each examiner: They’d rather play the role of helper than heavy.

“It’s hard when you get a student who can’t graduate, and we have to push that button: ‘Deny,’” Hybke said. “But we give them as many chances as possible to graduate. Sometimes, you’re left with no choice.”

“By the time it gets to that point of pushing the ‘deny’ button, we’ve gone over it and over it,” Kramer said.

The stories of success vastly outnumber the unfortunate close-calls, the examiners said.

Schuster said her tight-knit office's team approach to their work is also rewarding. Colleagues work in concert to make sure no student slips through the cracks or is stymied by processes or timelines.

"Communication is integral," she said.

Kumbier and Kramer also each keep a digital folder in their email of the "thank yous" that they occasionally field from graduates who are grateful for the last bit of guidance before qualifying to cross the Commencement stage.

"When you have a troubling day, they are a nice place to go back and look," Kramer said.

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