

UW Oshkosh helps student affairs professionals find their place

by **David Williams - Friday, February 22, 2008**

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This week roughly 500 people from across the country will trek to the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, searching for a career in higher education.

But UW Oshkosh isn't the only institution doing the hiring.

Representatives from nearly 200 colleges and universities will converge on Gruenhagen Conference Center, 208 Osceola Ave., Feb. 28 to March 2, for the 29th-annual Oshkosh Placement Exchange (OPE).

"We're one of the largest and most recognized job placement exchanges for candidates who are seeking employment in the fields of student housing, residence life, student activities, Greek life and other areas," said Marc Nysten, Gruenhagen Conference Center director and OPE chair.

Employers and applicants from 38 states will spend the bulk of the extended weekend wrapped up job interviews. In the evenings, the visiting colleges — including Colorado State University, New York University, Syracuse University and the University of Iowa — will host social events in Reeve Memorial Union, inviting candidates that they want to get to know better.

The concept of a placement exchange came about in the late 1970s when student affairs professionals were looking for an alternative means to meet candidates. Oshkosh first hosted a placement exchange in 1980, following a failed attempt at Western Illinois University, which was canceled due to low registration numbers. At that time, the event was called the Midwest Placement Exchange.

What started out as about 100 candidates and a dozen colleges swelled over the years, and eventually the event came to be called Oshkosh Placement Exchange.

"We try to dispel the myth that this is just a Midwest placement exchange," Nysten said, adding the same universities tend to return year after year not only because of the high quality of candidates that typically attend, but also because of the excellent service UW Oshkosh provides. "We get a lot of good feedback."

Fifty-three students were hired specifically to assist in the coordination of this year's OPE, bringing the total of the event's staff to nearly 100.

One of those employees is Abby Sylvia, residence hall director of Fletcher Hall, who first learned of OPE from the Chronicle of Higher Education when she was job hunting in 1998. But she didn't actually attend OPE until she was hired at Dakota State University, and then she came as an interviewer, not an interviewee.

"When I went to do my next job search, after I got my master's degree, I came back. It's a great way to do a lot of interviews in a short amount of time, to interview for a lot of places around the country in one

place,” Sylvia said, who accepted a job at UW Oshkosh and has been a part of OPE ever since.

Her tip for newcomers: “Only interview with schools that you’re seriously interested in. It’s not about how many interviews you can cram in. Six or seven interviews probably are enough for a successful job search.”

Allyson Dusold, a senior speech communication student at UW Oshkosh, has worked for the OPE since her freshman year. Those years serving as a student leader have revealed a passion for student affairs.

This time, Dusold will attend OPE as a job candidate as well as a staffer.

“I’m a bit nervous because while I’ve seen everyone go through it, I’ve never gone through it — but it’s an exciting nervous,” she said.

With 350 listed positions — which translates into upwards of 750 actual job openings — to choose from, Dusold hopes she will find an avenue into her dream job: working with student organizations.

While Nysten sees OPE as a means to showcase UW Oshkosh as a campus, he also notes that it is an asset to the surrounding community.

“All of the area hotels will be utilized Thursday through Sunday. We send out letters to restaurants and retailers. For the first time this year, we’ll be including questions on our survey to determine the full scope of economic impact,” Nysten said.

“The other piece that is important to us is that it’s important to the field of higher education. The next generation is being hired to serve campuses. That’s a real pride factor for us.”

For more information about OPE, visit www.theope.org.