

UWO awards first FERM bachelor's degrees

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Four of the first students to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh with bachelor's degrees in Fire and Emergency Response Management (FERM) will participate in commencement Saturday, Dec. 13.

The first of its kind in Wisconsin, the FERM bachelor's degree is designed to provide fire and emergency personnel with leadership and administrative skills necessary to advance their careers and lead public health and safety organizations. The degree is intended for individuals who already possess an associate's degree in fire protection, fire science, paramedic technician or emergency management from the Wisconsin Technical College System and want to take their careers to the next level, potentially including the ranks of lieutenant, captain, battalion chief and executive chief.

Many fire and emergency response departments throughout Wisconsin prefer those seeking leadership roles to have a bachelor's degree.

"It is becoming more and more common for fire and emergency response departments in Wisconsin to require firefighters have a bachelor's degree and sometimes a master's degree for advancement into leadership roles," said Chief Tim Franz of the Oshkosh Fire Department. "There wasn't any kind of a bachelor's degree for fire and emergency management in Wisconsin before this program, and we are very pleased that we have this option for the advancement of our firefighters."

Beginning Oct. 1, 2009, any firefighter participating in the U.S. Fire Administration's National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Certification Program will be required to have attained a minimum of a bachelor's degree as part of the selection criteria for the program.

Franz was involved in initial development of the FERM bachelor's degree program at UW Oshkosh. The degree program was launched in 2006 in response to a growing need expressed by fire chiefs throughout Wisconsin for education to support succession planning as fire and emergency executives in the Baby Boomer generation were retiring. Franz participated in the start-up of the program because of the challenges he had in furthering his own education, with the closest university offering a bachelor's degree program for fire and emergency response management more than 470 miles away. A firefighter since 1981, Franz helped develop the curriculum of the program at UW Oshkosh based in part on his experiences of what a fire chief experiences on a daily basis.

In three surveys since 2003, 90 percent of Wisconsin fire chiefs from 77 fire departments reported that about 90 percent of their career firefighters have only two-year degrees. According to those surveys, nearly half of the firefighters from those departments were very interested in enrolling in the four-year program.

Two members of Franz's department, Michael Wos and J.J. LaDue, both are graduating with the FERM

bachelor's degree.

“With Michael and J.J. graduating, they will set an example for other members of our department that obtaining a bachelor's degree can be done and that hopefully will encourage others to get involved with the program,” said Franz. The Oshkosh Fire department currently employs 108 people in six fire stations throughout the city.

Franz also said that the Oshkosh Fire Department encourages educational advancement for its employees by offering flexible work scheduling and providing computers for them to study and participate in classes at the station.

“The availability of this program benefits the department and the community because when it comes time to fill a leadership role, we can promote individuals from within the department rather than searching for people outside,” Franz commented. “Because they have the experience within the department, it helps build a fellowship among employees and in their leadership role, that person better understands the inner workings of the department.”

With a family that has inspired lifelong learning, LaDue, 26, feels this bachelor's degree will keep his options for a career in firefighting open for the future.

“Firefighting is a physically demanding career,” LaDue commented. “With this degree I will have a better ability to move into leadership ranks within a department, should something unthinkable happen to me healthwise.”

This bachelor's degree program features hybrid courses, which include both online and classroom instruction.

“I began the FERM program in an effort to increase my knowledge, skills, and abilities in the realm of fire service management,” said Assistant Chief Michael Sipin of the Neenah-Menasha Fire Department. “The class schedule is very flexible and accommodating to the working professional. The program has offered a good mix of traditional classroom lectures with modern methods of learning via the internet. This program is an excellent opportunity for Fire Service professionals to gain advanced education for future promotional opportunities.”

There currently are 20 students enrolled in the Fire and Emergency Response Management Bachelor's Degree program, including one female who is expected to graduate in fall of 2009.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the number of emergency management specialists of all kinds will grow faster than the average for all occupations between 2004 and 2014, adding more than 2,300 jobs over the decade.

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