UWO to offer bachelor's in Environmental Health

by David Williams - Tuesday, February 16, 2010

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The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's newest major will help fill vacancies in a field that is in great need of more degree-holding professionals.

Earlier this month, the UW System Board of Regents approved the Bachelor of Science in Environmental Health (BSEH) program. UW Oshkosh will be one of only two universities in UW System to offer the BSEH, joining UW-Eau Claire, which primarily serves the western half of the state.

The University proposed the BSEH degree after individuals from the Wisconsin Environmental Health Association and the State of Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services expressed a great need for well-trained professionals in the field of environmental health.

The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development projects that there will be an increase in jobs for environmental scientists, specialists and technicians ranging from 9 to 25 percent in the next ten years in eastern Wisconsin. Additionally, 50 percent of the environmental health workforce nationwide is within five years of retirement.

"The statistics predict that the current shortage of well-trained environmental health professionals will become severe in a few short years," said Provost Lane Earns. "Many students in the major will complete research-based internships that will develop their scholarly skills while also contributing to the research of faculty."

Through the new major — offered through the biology and microbiology department — students and faculty will develop and expand regional outreach and domestic and international partnerships, using the University's talents to help solve environmental health problems.

UW Oshkosh already has established connections with the health departments of nearly a dozen Wisconsin counties. Also, UW Oshkosh is the only four-year comprehensive institution in Wisconsin to have an ongoing formalized collaborative relationship with the American Health Education Council to involve undergraduate interns. A supervised internship will be required near the end of the program, in which environmental health students can work under the supervision of a public health professional to gain expertise in the field. Once the program becomes accredited, students completing the 120-credit environmental health major will be eligible to sit for a licensure exam as a registered sanitarian after graduation.

"The environmental health major will provide students with access to a new and expanding discipline in the biological/environmental sciences," said Greg Kleinheinz, associate professor of microbiology and director of the University's Environmental and Public Health Microbiology Laboratory. "Environmental health students will learn the skills necessary to work in local communities to protect public health and the environment. The program's combination of classroom and field experience will be unparalleled in

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the state and will help provide Wisconsin build a solid base of education for future environmental health professionals."

Because the requirements for the major are all pre-existing courses that have been reconfigured for the new major and because of a recent addition to the biology and microbiology department that was funded through 2007-2009 Wisconsin's Growth Agenda, which supported the addition of two-dozen tenure-track faculty positions in high-demand fields, the new program will not require the hiring of new faculty.

"In these challenging economic times, we are proud to expand our academic offerings and continue serving the knowledge needs of the people of Wisconsin's New North," Chancellor Richard H. Wells said. "By moving forward strategically, we demonstrate that the University is committed to aligning its mission with the evolving needs of the state of Wisconsin."