

# Wells to retire after leading 14 years of historic growth at UW Oshkosh

by News Bureau - Thursday, January 23, 2014

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/31435/wells-to-retire-after-leading-14-years-of-historic-growth-at-uw-oshkosh/>

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Chancellor Richard Wells announced his retirement on Jan. 23, signaling the first change in leadership at the institution in 14 years and the end of a tenure that demonstrated the critical leadership role public, higher education institutions can play in their communities', regions' and states' economies.

Wells plans to officially retire on Aug. 31 as UW Oshkosh's 10th and third-longest-serving chancellor. Appointed in 2000, he helped nurture nearly annual record growth in student enrollment and degrees awarded each year. He also helped envision, plan for and carry out a remarkable expansion and modernization of Wisconsin's third-largest university. Wells helped inspire a transformation of the University's reputation and its educational and economic impact in the Oshkosh community, the New North region and the state of Wisconsin.

"Together, we have enhanced UW Oshkosh's reputation as an excellent 'public-centric' university," Wells said in a statement to the campus community and University partners and stakeholders announcing his decision to retire.

"I will do everything I can over the next several months to assist with the successful launch of the Ray Cross UW System presidency and, most importantly, to help prepare our campus community for the transition to a successful new chancellorship," Wells stated. "... Our success has been a community effort, and I believe it sets stage for our next chancellor to help UW Oshkosh continue to excel."

## Leadership and service roles

Prior to his UW Oshkosh appointment ([click for more](#)), Wells served as Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Indiana State University, as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at West Chester University, and as Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of South Alabama.

He received his B.A. degree from William Penn College, his M.A. from the University of Arkansas, and his Ph.D. in Sociology from Texas A&M University. His close-to four decades of service at six different universities is characterized by 18 years of teaching contributions, many scholarly publications and 30 years of academic administrative leadership. Wells has fulfilled many leadership roles, establishing innovative, collaborative organizations and programs among different types of post-secondary institutions and not-for-profit and business organizations.

Wells has served as a member of the national boards of the NCAA Division III Presidents Council, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the Voluntary System of Accountability

(VSA), American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the American Council of Education (ACE). He served as chair of the national Task Force on Student Engagement for the Volunteer System of Accountability Project. He also served as a member of the boards of Affinity Health System, the Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce, the Northeast Wisconsin Educational Resource Alliance (NEW ERA), New North Inc., Oshkosh Convention and Visitor's Bureau, the Oshkosh Industrial Development Corporation (CHAMCO) and the Oshkosh Area United Way. He represents the UW System on the boards of the Wisconsin Higher Education Business Roundtable, the Wisconsin Campus Compact and the Wisconsin Economic Summit Series steering committee.

## **An era of great challenge, historic growth, curriculum transformation**

With a zeal for strategic planning centered on academic quality and student success, UW Oshkosh flourished under Wells' tenure. His retirement announcement coincides with the final preparations of the 2012-13 UW Oshkosh Strategic Plan Update and Annual Report, which, upon its release in February, will highlight another record enrollment achieved: **13,902 students, a 19 percent increase since fall 2000.**

During Wells tenure, UW Oshkosh's economic impact also broadened and came into focus. A 2009 study found the institution's impact was approximately one-half-billion dollars a year. The study found UW Oshkosh annually yields, directly and indirectly, approximately 9,000 jobs. A more recent estimate approximated campus construction projects since 2000 alone have helped generate 10,000 construction jobs. The 2009 study also found that the University generates an additional \$37.5 million in tax revenue for Wisconsin.

And this all says nothing of the economic force UW Oshkosh's graduates represent. In addition to several hundred UW Oshkosh-educated artists, communicators, social scientists and creative entrepreneurs finding new niches in the economy each year, approximately three-fourths of degrees awarded in recent years have been specific professional, career-ready or science, technology, engineering and math-based (STEM) baccalaureate degrees. Curriculum has expanded and aligned with the needs of the workforce, closing skills gaps while fortifying the critical thinking, problem solving, leadership and creative aptitudes to propel graduates throughout their lives.

"A truly successful chancellorship is always a community achievement, never one man's or woman's work," Wells said. "UW Oshkosh has thrived over these last, challenging 14 years because our campus community has worked together, remaining committed to and focused on a shared mission and vision. We have encouraged one another to reinvent and transform general education. We have challenged ourselves, our neighbors, our supporters and our partners to be more creative, efficient and entrepreneurial. We have expected students, faculty and staff to, in their own unique ways, share their wisdom and talents beyond the campus borders—to be more engaged in our broader community now and throughout our lives. I'm proud of what we have all accomplished and the path we have set for UW Oshkosh well into the future."

The University also, this academic year, launched its transformed general education program—the [University Studies Program \(USP\)](#). The USP, designed and put into action by UW Oshkosh faculty members, has already earned national attention for its interlacing of intentionally designed, relevant and high-impact courses, small learning communities and peer and alumni mentorship. The program is built on the educational foundations of sustainability, cultural awareness and understanding and lifelong

civic engagement.

Beyond the 19 percent enrollment growth and USP's launch, UW Oshkosh's many "points of pride" and achievements since Wells became Chancellor in 2000 include:

- Growth in the enrollment of students of color, which more than tripled from 438 in 2000 to 1,476 in fall 2013.
- Degrees conferred annually increased from 1,712 to 2,274, up 32.8 percent.
- Dramatic growth in the number of academic majors and baccalaureate degree completion programs, including, but not limited to:
  - Three New North-based, collaborative and workforce-responsive baccalaureate engineering technology majors in Mechanical Engineering Technology, Electrical Engineering Technology and Environmental Engineering Technology.
  - Undergraduate majors in theatre arts, environmental studies and environmental health.
  - An accelerated bachelor's degree for non-nursing graduates as well as an MBA foundations online program.
  - New Professional and Executive MBA paths.
  - The Northeast Wisconsin (NEW) Insurance Program.
  - The University's first doctoral degree, the Doctor of Nursing Practice.

## **A physical transformation, modernization**

The concentration on enhanced, quality education is just one part of the UW Oshkosh story during Wells' tenure. Equally remarkable is the physical expansion and modernization of the University campus. Since 2000, UW Oshkosh has grown from an institution with approximately, more than 2.7 million square feet to nearly 3.4 million, with a combined, 45 percent increase in classroom and laboratory space.

Since 2000, UW Oshkosh enhanced facilities by planning, completing and slating for completion approximately \$320 million in construction projects, with some still scheduled through 2015.

Just as important, Wells has stressed, is the alternative and entrepreneurial approach to bringing these projects to fruition.

Over the last 14 years, UW Oshkosh capital projects have involved the blending of \$160 million in state investment with \$111 million in program revenue (from residence hall fee to business service fee revenues) and more than \$45 million in donor-University-private sector partnership investment.

The campus's physical transformation is characterized by:

- The opening of the new academic center, Sage Hall.
- The construction of the 40,000-square foot UW Oshkosh Alumni Welcome and Conference Center, set to open in April this year.
- Construction and start-up of the western hemisphere's first commercial-scale dry fermentation anaerobic biodigester, which generates energy and revenue from the controlled decomposition of

crop, yard and campus food waste.

- Student affairs and residence life projects, including: the renovations of Taylor and Fletcher Halls, the Student Success Center, construction of the new Horizon Village residence hall, past and planned renovations of Reeve Memorial Union, the purchase and renovation of the 30,000-square-foot Newman Center for Academic Support and Diversity and Women's Center and construction of the nationally acclaimed Student Recreation and Wellness Center.
- A two-level parking ramp and renovation of a vacated supermarket into the campus facilities headquarters.
- The multi-phased renovation of Kolf Sports Center, the transformation of the Oshkosh Sports Complex and the planned, student-fee-funded and "bubbled" Recreational Complex.
- The planned renovation and modernization of Clow Social Science Center.
- The transformation of the former Oshkosh Area School District Lincoln Elementary School into Lincoln Hall, a new home for the Division of Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement and the Children's Learning and Care Center.

## **Sustainability, community partnerships, economic initiatives flourish**

In the 21st Century, the organizations that thrive are those that embody excellence while balancing efficiency and effectiveness. This is one definition of sustainability, and, while Wells has served as Chancellor, UW Oshkosh has repeatedly been recognized as a national and global higher education leader.

In 2000, UW Oshkosh has continued a journey that, influenced by the vision and encouragement of its students and dedication of its faculty and staff members, has earned the institution a national, highly-regarded and recognized reputation for its commitment to "green" principles. The University has committed itself to consistently pursuing EPA LEED building design standards, improving water and energy conservation, reducing pollution and making recycling a standard practices in its everyday operations.

UW Oshkosh's sustainability strides are marked by:

- Development of a comprehensive sustainability plan for the institution that guides teaching, research, service and operational practices in alignment with UW Oshkosh's mission.
- The 2003 EPA Leadership Award –one of the first ever presented to a university.
- The 2004 National Wildlife Federation Award, the 2005 Energy Star Award and the 2006 Wisconsin Clean Air Award.
- Declaration and recognition as the first Fair Trade University in the country in 2008.
- Designation as one of 21 colleges on the Princeton Review's 2013 Green Honor Roll and ranking as high as 14th nationally on the Sierra Club magazine's "Coolest Schools" list.
- Receipt of the Solid Waste Association of North America's 2011 Silver Waste-to-Energy Excellence Award for our dry fermentation anaerobic biodigester facility.

UW Oshkosh's shared vision during Wells tenure as Chancellor has also challenged the traditional perceptions that form the "town-and-gown" stereotype—the notion that a village, town or city and its embedded higher educational institution are two separate communities, operating independently of one another, without symbiosis or shared vision.

During Wells tenure, the idea of a University acting as a "community catalyst" has been repeatedly demonstrated in projects including:

- The collaborative redevelopment of UW Oshkosh's college sports complex to be shared places of athletic excellence for local K-12 school systems as the "Oshkosh Sports Complex."
- The marshaling of a team of public, nonprofit and for-profit partners, including the UW Oshkosh Foundation, to invest \$15 million in and revitalize downtown Oshkosh's riverfront hotel and convention center. The project will spark retail job growth, high-impact academic experiences and UW Oshkosh scholarship revenue.
- Implementation of second and third biodigesters. A large, 1.4 megawatt facility is operational at Wisconsin's largest dairy farm, Rosendale Dairy of Pickett. Another is running at the smaller, family-sized dairy farm, Allen Farms northwest of Oshkosh. Both projects are helping propel Wisconsin's legacy dairy farming industry. They are also giving UW Oshkosh environmental science students hands-on, high-impact opportunities and career paths involving rural, renewable energy.

## **Colleagues around nation, region, community applaud long-serving chancellor**

Wells' decision to retire triggered a chorus of praise, well wishes and reflections from colleagues involved on boards, in initiatives and leading organizations across the campus, local community, region and nation.

"Chancellor Wells has been emblematic of the very best in public higher education leadership," said Muriel Howard, president of the nearly 420-member American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and a 2010 recipient of a UW Oshkosh honorary doctorate. "His dedication to students, his concern for academic quality and his commitment to the community and region are the very definition of the public purpose of public higher education."

Beth Wyman, a two-time alumna and president and current member of the UW Oshkosh Foundation Board as well as current president of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation Board of Directors, said it has been a privilege to serve alongside Wells as UW Oshkosh envisioned and accomplished the impressive list of campus and community enhancements and initiatives during his tenure.

"It has been an incredible experience to watch the University strengthen its reputation as a first-rate educational institution and to be part of a change of the campus, the vision for its future and the integration of UW Oshkosh more deeply into the community," Wyman said.

"As a business owner of a local fitness and personal training studio, we employ a lot of people from the UW Oshkosh kinesiology department," Wyman said. "It's just one more way the University, under

Chancellor Wells' leadership, has integrated into so many different areas of the community. From the startup and growth of the Business Success Center to Career Services to the Small Business Development Center, we see answers to Chancellor Wells' question, 'How can we give back to the community and enhance the community?'"

Craig Culver, CEO and co-founder of Culver's Franchising System Inc. and a UW Oshkosh alumnus serving as chair of the nomination committee of the UW Oshkosh Foundation Board, credited Wells for building strong relationships with partners close to home and throughout Wisconsin.

"Chancellor Wells has done a remarkable job of leading UW Oshkosh," Culver said. "He has led a great university to even greater heights, fostering a strong relationship with not only the city of Oshkosh, but also the region and the whole state of Wisconsin. He will be leaving UW Oshkosh in a better place, and I know he'll be missed by all the students, faculty and others he has touched so positively. I wish him and Christie well as they venture into their next chapter."

Alumnus Dave Omachinski, chairman of the board of Anchor Bancorp Wisconsin, Inc., and an independent business consultant who has served 12 years on the Foundation board, credits Wells with helping "bridge the gap between the University and the Oshkosh community."

"He has been an advocate for the community, and, in particular, he has been a tremendous advocate for our revitalizing downtown," Omachinski said. "The Best Western Premier Oshkosh Waterfront Hotel and Convention Center may not have been renovated if Chancellor Wells had not stepped forward and made it a priority for the University and the UW Oshkosh Foundation."

Kathi Seifert, co-chair of the New North Inc. Board of Directors and owner of the business consultancy, Katapult, Inc., praised Wells focus on keeping higher education a workforce and competitive priority.

"Chancellor Wells has been an exceptional visionary in doing so much to positively advance collaboration and economic development throughout Northeast Wisconsin," Seifert said. "He led the effort to create NEW ERA, bringing all leaders of public universities and colleges in northeast Wisconsin together to partner in addressing common goals; numerous successes were achieved which benefitted students and businesses within our region and beyond. He was also one of the founding members of New North Inc., and consistently shared his belief that secondary education and four-year education were critical to create the skilled workforce we need to ensure northeast Wisconsin is competitive globally in the future for business and job growth."

Four UW System presidents—former, acting and newly-appointed—and the President of the Board of Regents also applauded Wells' service to UW Oshkosh and the state.

"Rick Wells is a friend, and I deeply admire him as a leader," UW System Board of Regents President Michael Falbo said. "As a Regent, it has been a pleasure to work with him and see so many UW Oshkosh academic and community initiatives launch and succeed. He has helped guide the state's third largest university on a plan and path that proves the remarkable impact our institutions, and the students, staff and faculty knowledge they support, have on the lives of Wisconsinites, their communities, our workforce and the economy."

“Rick has been a strong voice for UW Oshkosh students, faculty, and staff, as well as an effective advocate for the whole UW System,” UW System Interim President Richard Telfer said. “Among his fellow UW Chancellors, he is respected for his commitment to the UW System’s vital mission, his broad view of the higher-education landscape and his collegial, thoughtful leadership style.”

“In my role as leader of the UW-Extension and Colleges, I had the privilege of working in collaboration with Chancellor Wells for several years,” newly-appointed UW System President Ray Cross said. “His passion for and commitment to enhancing the profile of Wisconsin’s higher educational system at home and around the globe has been greatly admired by his fellow chancellors. His focus on meaningfully demonstrating UW Oshkosh’s economic impact – in his community and region – has helped set a standard by which we continue to show Wisconsin the multifaceted, public good each UW college, institution and Extension branch provides.”

UW System President Emeritus Katharine Lyall, who appointed Wells in 2000, cited his leadership in transforming UW Oshkosh “physically, academically and civically.”

“Over the past decade, the institution has become a focus for regional economic development initiatives, an innovative in applying faculty and student talents to community growth and a leader in green technology and environmental management,” Lyall said. “Chancellor Wells has been exceptionally student-oriented and has modeled the kind of teamwork within the UW System that makes the Wisconsin Idea a reality. I am very grateful to Rick and Christie for their investment in UW Oshkosh, the UW System and Wisconsin, and I wish them well-earned relaxation and great pleasure in their retirement. They leave Wisconsin better than they found it.”

Former UW System President Kevin Reilly described Wells as “a champion for the comprehensive institutions,” a leader who balanced a healthy criticism for higher education “but also made us all feel very proud – even while he was being critical – about the work we do given the tremendously positive impact it can have on the lives of our students, their families and generations to come.”

“I am reminded of the 1960s saying, ‘Think globally, act locally,’” Reilly said. “I think it really applies to (Wells). He was involved in general education reform to a competitive compensation system for faculty and staff that will help keep talent in the globally-competitive market we find ourselves in. In the community, he was really innovative, from groundbreaking projects including the biodigester partnerships with international partners on local farms to Oshkosh’s downtown hotel redevelopment. It has all been to the betterment of the University of Wisconsin System and Oshkosh, in particular. He expanded and improved the reputation of UW Oshkosh in the state and nationally.”

## **Next steps for UW Oshkosh**

Wells will continue his duties as Chancellor through Aug. 31. Interim President Telfer and Chancellor Wells have begun discussing the transition process – a discussion that will continue with newly-appointed UW System President Cross in the coming months. UW System leadership will work with Board of Regents and UW Oshkosh leadership to develop a timetable for the search and screen process that will lead to the naming of Chancellor Wells’ successor.

Following a national search and an intensive screening process, an appointed search committee will

recommend a list of candidates as finalists for consideration by the UW System President and a Board of Regents committee yet to be formed. After a series of public presentations and personal interviews, the UW System president and the Regent committee will recommend one individual to the full board, which must approve the appointment.

The timeline for the process will be shared with the campus community and public in the months ahead.

“It has been my good fortune to be in the presence of so many caring faculty members, students, Academic Staff members, University staff members, alumni and friends of UW Oshkosh,” Wells stated. “Consequently, I see a future full of promise and success ahead for our UW Oshkosh community. Hail Titans!”