

Building knowledge: Professor updates construction skills with summer internship



Dean Wirtanen, an associate professor in the construction major at University of Wisconsin-Stout, routinely takes his students to job sites and manufacturers around the region to let them see the industry firsthand.

This summer Wirtanen took a “field trip” by himself, although his students still will be the beneficiaries come fall.

Wirtanen helped with three regional construction projects with Market & Johnson Inc., an Eau Claire-based construction company. The work was part of a 10-week, 400-hour Faculty Internship through Associated General Contractors of America’s Education and Research Foundation, with equal financial support from Market & Johnson and UW-Stout.

Faculty internship

The goal of the internship is to make sure that professors — and therefore their students — are up to date with industry best practices and standards. Wirtanen is certain that his students will benefit from his new experiences when classes start again in September. “It will affect every course I teach in a very positive way,” Wirtanen said.

“I’ve learned a lot every day. It’s a nice mix of learning in the field and in the office. Both have been very valuable.”

Wirtanen didn’t just observe but helped with the six-story Haymarket Landing apartment-commercial complex, a three-story apartment building south of Oakwood Mall and a renovation project at Xcel Energy offices, all in Eau Claire.

Wirtanen, who lives near Eau Claire, is a professionally licensed civil engineer with a degree from the University of Minnesota. He has taught at UW-Stout for eight years.

Prior to teaching at UW-Stout, Wirtanen worked on architectural engineering projects in the construction industry but not for a general contractor such as Market & Johnson.

“Most students end up working for a general contractor, or subcontractor who works for general contractors,” Wirtanen said. “The internship is directed at where our students will end up.”

The Bachelor of Science program in construction is one of UW-Stout’s more popular majors with nearly 300 students. Many graduates remain in the area and work for regional companies.

Updating skills

At Haymarket Landing, Wirtanen worked with 2013 UW-Stout alumnus Tim Esselman, the on-site project manager. At the apartment building near Oakwood Mall, he assisted alumni Jeremy Drake, 2004, and Matt Faulkner, 1996, the latter is an executive vice president with Market & Johnson and who is on UW-Stout’s construction advisory board. *(cont’d)*



Under Drake, Wirtanen's duties included estimating, getting bids from subcontractors, hiring subcontractors and preparing and updating five-week rolling construction schedules.

Along with the three project sites, Wirtanen did some office work for Market & Johnson projects in Park Falls and in Michigan. In one instance, he received approval for a new type of shingle for a building two weeks before groundbreaking.

"Most people don't realize how much work goes on before you break ground," Wirtanen said.

While on the project sites, Wirtanen brushed up on reading construction plans, a skill that UW-Stout students begin learning as freshmen. "Plans can have over 100 pages and 700 to 800 pages of specs. We want to teach students to be able to find a detail in those plans in a few minutes. Time is money in this business," Wirtanen said.

Associated General Contractors is a professional organization for contractors who work in the construction industry. Market & Johnson is a member of AGC. The internship was developed by members of the AGC Education and Research Foundation and the Associated Schools of Construction. Three other professors around the U.S. have similar internships this summer, and 15 have benefited since the program began in 2013, said Melinda Patrician, foundation director.

"The faculty internship initiative provides a great opportunity for construction faculty, not only to hone their own skills, which they pass on to their students, but also to nurture relationships with the industry that will hire their students," Patrician said. "In the several years we have sponsored this initiative, there has been nothing but positive feedback. We want it to grow and grow."

Wirtanen had a summer internship for four weeks in 2013 with the Mechanical Contractors Association of America. Another UW-Stout construction professor, Tim Becker, had the same internship this summer.

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