

UW-River Falls Career Treks connect students to employers

December 22, 2016--Over the course of three months during the fall semester, College of Business and Economics (CBE) students at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls visited four companies as part of the inaugural Career Treks series sponsored by UWRF Career Services and CBE. The free event series provided unique opportunities for students to connect with industry professionals, broaden their awareness of career paths, and develop and expand their professional networks.

Students had the opportunity to participate in three treks throughout the fall. September's event was held at Uline in Hudson while students traveled to Bremer Bank in Lake Elmo, Minn., in October. November's trek split time between two companies: Kwik Trip in La Crosse and Fastenal in Winona, Minn. Each event featured facility tours and company presentations. The day trip to Bremer Bank also featured a networking session with UW-River Falls alumni employed by Bremer.

According to McKenna Pfeiffer, assistant director of Career Services at UW-River Falls, these trips gave students the opportunity to directly interact with the companies in a distinct manner.

"They learned what made a successful candidate at each company," explained Pfeiffer. "By physically visiting these companies, our students were able to visualize if they could see themselves working there."

Visiting employers at their home facilities provided students with a different perspective that they might not have experienced otherwise.

"At Bremer Bank, we had several off the cuff conversations with employees," Pfeiffer said. "The enthusiasm they conveyed to our students was incredible. They each spoke with such passion about their career and employer and we really got a sense that it was a special place to work. The conversations were so significant because they were candid -- these were employees that we just ran into during our tour -- and those exchanges would not have been as meaningful anywhere else."

"I was most interested in seeing if the specific locations we visited would not only have jobs that I would enjoy doing, but also have jobs where I could use my education," said Michael Steinkraus, a UWRF senior business administration-management major from Woodbury, Minn., who attended all three Career Treks. "I could then try to visualize myself at that specific company, which is much easier to do if you see it in person on the Career Trek as opposed to imagining it. I also enjoyed seeing the employees of each job

site, as their faces would say quite a bit about the level of happiness they held at their job.”

As part of their interaction with each employer, UW-River Falls students broadened their knowledge of not just the particulars of the companies, but of potential career paths.

“Students learned what positions the company sought out, many of which weren’t necessarily positions the students had thought of before. Their eyes were opened to new job areas and many students walked away armed with new information about their fields,” explained Pfeiffer. All participating students are studying within CBE, while all of the participating employers have opportunities for each major within CBE.

The treks attracted more than 75 students, with over 50 attending the Kwik Trip/Fastenal event, and many attending multiple treks. Participants ranged from first year to graduate students and included faculty members. Professor Claire McCarty, a member of the graduate faculty in CBE who teaches management/human resources and organizational behavior courses, attended multiple Career Treks and found the events informative and relevant to her teaching. McCarty said she learned so much.

“From Uline, I found examples in plant safety, in organizational culture, in benefits, use of cross-training, and empowered customer service positions that I brought back to the classroom to use as illustrations for concepts discussed,” McCarty said.

The opportunity to get off campus and interact with employers was beneficial to all participants, McCarty said.

“I always appreciate experiences like these to learn, to see how organizations differ, change, grow, and get a sense of their culture,” she said. “It gives me the opportunity to bring to class local, relevant, and current information.”

According to Steinkraus, a key benefit of the Career Treks was the ability to link a student’s UW-River Falls education to real-world business settings.

“Career Treks are extremely beneficial and worthwhile events. They allow students to visually see what they have been learning for years, and they also give new students a chance to see the different faces of the business world before committing. Organized events like these are opportunities everyone should be utilizing,” explained Steinkraus. “Employers are always so gracious about coming to campus and this was our opportunity to visit them. Students have a more holistic presentation of the companies. When these employers visit campus in the future, students who participated will already have the backstory of the company. This creates more meaningful future interactions,” added Pfeiffer.

Visiting companies in the area highlighted UWRF’s commitment to regional economic development. A targeted audience was provided, both for employers who may look to hire graduates in these fields in the future, and CBE students who may seek employment

within these companies after graduation. Organizers felt the narrowed audience contributed to the initial success of Career Treks.

“This structure really allowed us to get this project off the ground,” Pfeiffer. “These Career Treks give UW-River Falls momentum in strengthening our relationship with employers.”

Pfeiffer and Laura Boche, a senior academic adviser in CBE, spearheaded the efforts behind Career Treks. Following the success of the fall events, plans are underway for future events that will include companies relevant to a broader variety of majors across campus. Future treks are planned for February, March, and April 2017.

For more information, contact UW-River Falls Career Services at 715-425-3572 or email career.services@uwrf.edu.

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Photo: Students from the College of Business and Economics (CBE) at UW-River Falls participate in a warehouse tour at Uline in Hudson as part of the inaugural Career Treks series at the university.

Recognized as one of the Midwest’s Best Universities by U.S. News and World Report and the Princeton Review, the University of Wisconsin-River Falls is located in a scenic community just 30 miles from downtown St. Paul, Minn. UW-River Falls students are empowered, beginning in their first year, to participate in undergraduate research, study abroad, and collaborative learning with award-winning and caring faculty. UW-River Falls partners with leading businesses and non-profit organizations to conduct research, offer student internships, and serve as an economic engine for western Wisconsin.

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