

## Seeing the Forest for the Trees – An Industry & Academic Partnership

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### ABSTRACT

Partnerships between Universities and professional organizations can address the demand for well-educated professionals. Collaboration between the University of Wisconsin – Stout (UW-Stout) and the North American Wholesale Lumber Association (NAWLA) Education Foundation (NEF) connected science, technology, engineering & mathematics (STEM) students to internships and STEM faculty with industry leaders. In order to meet the workforce needs of the lumber industry, NAWLA began an educational program in 2011 that would encourage students outside of typical forestry-related programs to investigate opportunities in the lumber business. This paper examines the partnership between UW-Stout and NAWLA, and the results from the first offering in a three-year planned series.

Keywords: STEM, Conference Proceedings, Career Development, Partnering

### INTRODUCTION

NAWLA is an international trade association of over 650 leading forest products and building material industry wholesalers, manufacturers and industry affiliated companies throughout the United States and Canada. NAWLA has defined a need for career-focused professionals that have an interest in the lumber business. UW-Stout is a comprehensive, career-focused polytechnic university where students, faculty and staff use applied learning, scientific theory and research to solve real-world problems, grow the state economy and serve society.

### BACKGROUND

NAWLA hired a consultant, Dovetail Partners, to champion the new educational program titled “Seeing the Forest for the Trees: A Career Exploration Workshop”. NAWLA and Dovetail developed a short-course pilot program to be conducted in a three-year delivery format, once per year, at four locations across the country. If successful, NAWLA intends to roll-out the program nationwide. Dovetail contacted UW-Stout as a possible partner in May 2011, due to the polytechnic programs at the University and the potential fit for the graduates they were seeking. The UW-Stout Construction Department, part of the STEM College, embraced the partnership with NAWLA and Dovetail to deliver the first offering of the course. Across a span of six months, course logistics were coordinated and implemented. The goal for participation was to get 15-20 students registered for the first offering. With exceptional advertising and the unique interdisciplinary nature of the course, the quota was exceeded and overloaded to 23 students.

### METHODOLOGY

The first offering was in January 2012 through a condensed 1-week term, meeting each day for 8 hours. Numerous topic specialists, including STEM faculty from UW-Stout, NAWLA and Dovetail industry leaders, were brought in to the classroom to provide teaching of material ranging from forestry, ecology, business, supply-chain, to sustainable considerations in lumber

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and architectural design. In addition, the participants spent portions of three days on field trips to support the classroom instruction. The last day included a career panel of current NAWLA companies that described opportunities within their respective organizations. Each student who completed the course now has the prerequisite to interview for a position for an internship in the upcoming year within a NAWLA organization company.

**FINDINGS**

To all partners; UW-Stout, NAWLA and Dovetail, the course was a resounding success. Student evaluations, conducted after the course, demonstrate a breadth of learning and increased awareness of lumber industry opportunities by the participants. Of the original participants, one has been placed in a spring 2012 internship. There are additional opportunities that will be available to the students through early summer 2012 and into the future. NAWLA is working with member companies to develop additional opportunities for future offerings of the course. An end-of-course evaluation was also conducted for all faculty and industry participants. Lessons learned from this first offering will be used to tailor future offerings of the course in other locations as well as in 2013 at UW-Stout.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR BEST PRACTICES**

It is evident through the first offering of this course that pre-planning is essential to the program. Through feedback from participants, presenters and organizers of the course, a list of best practices has been established as this group works toward the second offering. Suggestions include additional coordination amongst guest speakers and communications amongst all participants to fully understand their role in the program. Due to the rural location of UW-Stout, long bus rides to field visits can provide opportunities for additional learning activities. For example, the stakeholder group is proposing options to supplement in-class lecture material with videos on the bus to better showcase potential job opportunities to students and provide more focus on STEM career opportunities.

**FUTURE WORK**

UW-Stout is currently in the planning stages with NAWLA for its second on-site offering of the course. It is in the best interest of both parties to schedule the course at a time that ensures high student participation, while still providing ample time to release internship opportunities. In an ideal situation, it would benefit the students to receive credit toward their degree requirements as they did in the pilot; however that will be reviewed in future offerings. The future enrollment size for the course will be determined by the results of this first offering. In 2014, the entire program will be reviewed to determine the viability of a long-term offering across the United States.

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