Column: UWSP continues to embraces Wisconsin Idea

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Before 2014 draws to a close, we mark a special anniversary: The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point celebrated 120 years in the community this year.

Can you imagine the excitement to learn a school would be built in Stevens Point? People paraded in the street when the telegram came at midnight July 21, 1893. The Board of Regents of Normal Schools of Wisconsin chose Stevens Point on the 101st ballot.

The first classes were taught in the building we now know as Old Main. The Stevens Point Normal School opened Sept. 17, 1894, with 200 students enrolled in teacher training courses.

In fall 2014, 9,346 students were enrolled at UWSP. They attend classes and study in 14 academic and administrative buildings.

While much has changed, campus origins are rooted in core beliefs that remain strengths today.

The city of Stevens Point, Portage County, educators and business leaders worked together to bring a college here. The close connection between the community and campus was established from the beginning. It has continued and grown through north central Wisconsin in the last 120 years.

The Wisconsin Idea, first articulated by University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise in 1904, continues to be embraced at UWSP and the UW System: Research and knowledge of the university system would help solve problems and improve health and quality of life of all state citizens.

Today that belief is embedded in Our Partnership for Thriving Communities, UWSP’s strategic plan. It provides a framework to be relevant and responsive to community needs.

Stevens Point leaders believed that establishing a normal school would enhance significantly life in their community. It has. The university offers educational opportunities and a variety of music, theater and visual arts, public lectures and athletic events enjoyed throughout the region. Schmeeckle Reserve, a 280-acre nature preserve, is a treasured recreational area open to the public 365 days a year.

Diversity in faculty, staff and students enriches our communities culturally, too.

Wisconsin’s long tradition of making higher educational opportunities available and affordable to residents began in the mid-1800s. The commitment to providing affordable quality higher education remains a proud tradition.
The university also has a significant economic impact. In 1893, when the City Council met to discuss the merits of a normal school, a financial committee estimated it would bring $100,000 in annual income to the city.

The economic impact today is about $407.8 million annually.

UWSP is one of the largest employers in Portage County. Our 544 faculty and instructional staff plus nearly 700 professional and support staff live and support communities in Portage County and beyond.

UWSP’s rich history precedes many of us, but we are all part it. I entered the university’s story in July 2010 as the 14th chancellor.

Stevens Point Normal School became State Teachers College, a degree-granting institution, in 1926. In 1951, students seeking degrees in fields other than teaching could enroll in Stevens Point State College. Today, UWSP offers 58 majors and more than 100 undergraduate, graduate and doctorate programs. It became part of the UW System in 1974.

While communities in northern Wisconsin competed to become the site of the sixth normal school in the late 1890s, we collaborate now. The university that began in Stevens Point now serves the entire northern and central region, with offices in Wausau and Rhinelander and three field stations reaching north to Lake Superior.

Registrar Dan Kellogg estimates that the total number who graduated since 1894 is 88,775. If you are part of this awesome number and have gone on to make meaningful contributions in your community, happy anniversary.

As we enter UWSP’s next decade, our dedication to preparing students for successful careers and helping our communities thrive will not waver.

(If you’d like to learn more about the history, emeritus professor of history Justus Paul wrote a wonderful book, “The World is Ours,” for the university’s centennial.)

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