

Our University Shapes its Future

Nan Nelson, *Leading Edge Economy Signals Team*



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Michael Alexander, Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

Enrollment at UW-Green Bay is up 20% in the past five years, and up another 8.2% in the Fall 2024 semester, making the Green Bay campus one of the fastest growing in the University of Wisconsin system.

“We’re very excited about our enrollment gains,” said Chancellor Michael Alexander, who has held the position since Spring of 2020.

“Our willingness to change, to see the future and move towards it, is the reason.”

“It’s really important for leaders to ‘go where the puck WILL be,’ as Wayne Gretzky famously said,” Alexander noted, “not aim for where the puck is today. It’s always challenging to think about change—what can happen and how to respond—but embracing change is the key to a successful organization.”

“It’s good to help all our leaders be empowered to embrace and not fear change, and that is something that Envision’s strategic foresight workshops have helped us do. I would send as many as possible of our leaders at all levels to Envision’s training.”

UW-Green Bay is responding to the hurricane-force winds of change in higher education by not waiting for state funding decisions but rather by acting more like a nimble private institution. “We need to trust in our ability to create our own revenue streams. Of course, we need to keep doing the right things in the right way because we are a public institution,” Alexander said.

Dr. Alexander offered three examples of this type of innovation: Last year, 85,883 unique learners participated in non-credit work at UW-Green Bay. These types of non-degree certifications and other credentials are, Alexander says, the future of education.

Last year UW-Green Bay pioneered a new system of “direct admission” in partnership with Green Bay Area Public Schools so that all graduating seniors are directly admitted to UW-Green Bay without a formal application. The UW System this year recognized the success of this method, and 10 of the 13 campuses have now opted in, allowing the program to extend statewide. “I’m proud to have the System copy our initiative,” Alexander said. “It says UW-Green Bay believes in you and your future. We are living our mission to serve those who might not have thought of themselves as continuing after high school.”

Thirdly, UW-Green Bay is the first UW campus to use EdSights, a generative AI tool, to support student success. “We have a chatbot with the personality of our mascot Phlash that is available 24-7 to interact with learners to answer questions, do wellness checks, and generally assist the interaction of our faculty and staff with learners.”

“You know, we exist because of community support,” Alexander said, “and we are engaging together in many more ways than ever before.” The Weidner Center and Phoenix Sports are growing parts of that engagement, but many new partnerships are coming into being. The Resch School of Engineering is offering degrees in computing, electrical, environmental and mechanical engineering as well as math and statistics. “It’s key that our programs now reflect what the community needs,” Alexander explained.

“Learners no longer have to go away from the community to get these degrees,” he said, “and so the door is open for many more learners to get the skills that local businesses are desperately in need of.”

Schreiber Institute for Women’s Leadership, inspired by the Schreiber Foods Inc. work in this area, is another example of community support. “Over 60% of our learners are female,” Alexander noted. “We have moved from offering programming to now offering credentials that will help women power their careers and their lives.”

The Bay of Green Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve will be the first large-scale, federally-funded (\$1.24 million per year expected) research project for UW-Green Bay. “This will be an important part of our future as an institution, but also important for the nation and the world as we holistically address a range of water issues like PFAS, changing water levels, algae blooms, and more.”

Cofrin Technology and Education Center will be a \$96.3 million new building, scheduled to open in 2027, replacing the outmoded Cofrin Library. “There will be less space in this building, but it will offer new ways of learning, conducting research, working and collaborating,” Alexander said. “It will cover the gamut of ways to learn, from the oral traditions of our First Nations to the future of learning through artificial intelligence. In the future learning will consist not just of absorbing information from a book or lecture, but it will involve personal interaction to interpret knowledge, to hear different views of it, and come together to learn together.”

It’s going to be an exciting ride in the next few years, and that will surely NOT be the end of change for UW-Green Bay if Chancellor Michael Alexander has anything to say about it. Envision is pleased to support the efforts of our university to discover its best possible path as an institution and as a key partner in making ours a community of choice.