

Title: *Point Forward*

Category and Title: 18b. Teresa Du Bois Exline Award for Best Practices in Communications and Marketing, 3,000 to 9,999 FTE

Institution: University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

General Description: In fall 2007, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point found that the hoped-for City approval of the Campus Master Plan—UWSP’s first in 40 years—was not as clear-cut as it had seemed. Despite a two-year planning process that included a series of positive public forums, the university turned onto an unexpectedly rocky road marked by political opposition and neighborhood protest.

On the one hand, the University Relations and Communications Office (URC) had been under interim leadership for much of this planning period, and a comprehensive strategy had not been developed. On other hand, the situation evolved into a classic David and Goliath story with citizens feeling threatened on the eve of the Master Plan’s approval.

With signs that the plan was at risk, the University Relations and Communications Office (URC), under a new executive director, implemented a communications plan with the theme *Point Forward*, combining the city’s and campus’s name and Wisconsin’s one-word state motto.

The Campus Master Plan represents the physical foundation needed to sustain the competitive edge that has placed UWSP consistently among *U.S. News’* Top 10 Midwest Universities. A planned enrollment expansion over the coming six years will be supported by new and improved academic facilities. In addition to the first new student housing since 1968 and a new science building, the Campus Master Plan calls for expanded on-campus parking. Demonstrating unified community support before the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents, which would have to approve the plan and, eventually, to the state legislature, would be crucial in order to best position UWSP, which competes with other UW campuses for funding.

Goals and Objectives: URC engaged in a cohesive group of tactics in *Point Forward* that won over the opposition and eventually garnered a stunning, unanimous approval from the Stevens Point Common Council:

Media Relations

- URC garnered rare coverage by the *Stevens Point Journal's* (SPJ) Madison bureau of the Chancellor's well-received introductory Campus Master Plan presentation to the Board of Regents on September 6. This helped demonstrate, in our local market, broader preliminary support for university's direction with the master plan.
- URC countered the voice of a local columnist, who would remain critical of the university, with two key guest column placements in the SPJ, one by UWSP's student government president—also a lifetime local resident— and another by a retired UWSP senior administrator who is a fixture in the local community. The latter column connected another significant university/community event to the Master Plan. Each column was ghost-written by URC.
- URC secured interviews for the Chancellor and senior administrators, speaking in support of the plan, on local and regional radio, including the local WSPT morning show (twice), the Wisconsin Public Radio affiliate in Wausau, and commercial news-talk WSAU Radio in Wausau.

Chancellor as Champion

- URC created a multi-media PowerPoint presentation for the Chancellor to present to key groups. It included video clips of key stakeholders describing the need for the Master Plan and reinforcing the call for support. Clips featured a student, an academic dean, the mayor of Stevens Point, and the chairman of the Chancellor's Advisory Council, who, as a Wausau resident and business leader, spoke on the importance of the university's progress to the broader Central Wisconsin Region. Audiences included the UW Board of Regents, the University Foundation Advisory Board, the Chancellor's Advisory Council, and attendees of the Chancellor's Open Forum for faculty and staff. On each occasion, the Chancellor took the opportunity to encourage people to speak in support of the plan at the Common Council meeting, prior to the vote.
- The Chancellor spoke stirringly in support of the Master Plan before the City Plan Commission and on the evening of the final Council vote. Her talking points and speeches were written by URC.
- The Chancellor met personally with each city alderperson. URC briefed her and prepared talking points before each meeting. The Chancellor followed the meetings and the council vote with handwritten notes of appreciation to each alderperson, as well as to each speaker who addressed the council in support of UWSP, and also to several who spoke in opposition.

Neighborhood Outreach

UWSP had held a series of open forums over the two years of development of the Campus Master Plan, and several campus neighbors attended. As of late 2007, however, as the City began its final consideration of the plan, neighbors began to complain that they were in the dark and had had little to no chance for input. Their key concerns included the university's intent, albeit over many years, to acquire residential properties as they came on the market, in a neighborhood adjacent to the campus. Also of concern was the perception that the university wouldn't move quickly enough to develop additional on-campus parking to alleviate some of the spill-over, on-street parking in nearby neighborhoods. URC developed efforts to reach out to UWSP's neighbors—if not to win their support, then to at least lay the groundwork for a future in which they could trust that their voices would be heard.

- URC produced flyers announcing two neighborhood meetings that it organized and that more than 50 residents attended. URC also worked with student government to ensure that students attended to provide their perspective on issues that were discussed, which included many topics beyond the Campus Master Plan. URC facilitated the meetings; the Chancellor and several faculty and staff members also attended.
- As it became evident that neighbors, students, and university administrators had many issues to discuss, URC proposed to the neighbors that they form an association. After the second neighborhood meeting, two residents came forward to help organize and lead the association. Initial communications with URC became contentious, but a face-to-face meeting resulted in a positive approach to moving forward. We provided literature and links to Web sites on forming associations. We offered a meeting space in the new Dreyfus University Center and provided photocopying services for flyers and brochures. We also offered to arrange a student design competition within the College of Fine Arts and Communication to create a logo for what, by the end of the year, was organized as the Old Main Neighborhood Association (OMNA), Stevens Point's first such organization.
- To maintain better local relations, URC's senior communications specialist for government relations was given the additional responsibility of serving as UWSP's community liaison, or ombudsman, with a charge to serve as OMNA's point of contact on any issue or concern.
- OMNA has begun sending representatives to regular university meetings, including those of the Faculty Senate.

Government Relations

The Stevens Point Plan Commission meeting of August 27, 2007 gave the first indication that the Campus Master Plan was in trouble. Commission members, including an alderperson who sits on the commission, rejected what the university had considered minor parts of the plan, and would later vote against them. URC's government relations management has traditionally focused on state and federal relations, but the Master Plan crisis underscored the need for new attention to local government.

- Alderpersons were invited to attend the university's neighborhood meetings. Several did, and heard productive discussions among neighbors, students, and university faculty and administrators. The city clerk's office issued official advance notices waiving the quorum requirements when two or more council members attend the same gathering. The spirit of communication and compromise carried over to some of the substantive sticking points with alderpersons, contributing to their eventual support.
- URC arranged one-on-one meetings between the Chancellor and each of the 11 alderpersons in the weeks leading up to the final vote. Meetings were generally cordial and seemed to help clarify many concerns. After the meetings, based on our polling of the alderpersons, URC predicted a vote of either 7-4 or 8-3 in favor of the Campus Master Plan.
- To rally members of the campus community to attend and to speak at the Council meeting on the final vote, URC executed the *Point Forward* blitz. Two hundred flyers with talking points and *Point Forward* buttons were distributed among students, faculty, staff, and the Chancellor's Advisory Council, which included several highly respected members of the local community. Wearing buttons and prepared by the talking points, about 25 speakers and dozens of additional attendees created an overflow audience at the council meeting, vastly outnumbering opponents and helping to influence the outcome that surprised everyone—an 11-0 vote in favor of the Campus Master Plan.

Student Engagement

During the neighborhood meetings, it quickly became evident that communication between the university's immediate neighbors and its students would be crucial to successful relations in the future. Most concerns voiced about the university included statements of concern over the behavior of intoxicated students, who have in the past behaved destructively in residents' yards as they walk to the city's bar district downtown. Nearby homeowners also spoke of concerns over some landlords who don't take care of their properties, and conversations with students made it clear that the neighbors want to help students advocate for their rights as tenants. Thus, the neighborhood meetings provided the basis to begin to steer the university's neighbors toward consideration of ongoing, bigger-picture issues.

- UWSP's Student Government Association has designated a delegate to OMNA. Other students also attend the meetings.
- OMNA has committed to a central role in the university's annual freshman picnic to help introduce new students to their new neighborhood.

Description of how project fits into overall institutional advancement goals:

Point Forward ensured Common Council approval of the Campus Master Plan, which sends a crucial signal to the Board of Regents, the Legislature, and other stakeholders that the local community supports its university's development and thus so should the State and private donors. *Point Forward* also led to a new spirit of cooperation and communication between UWSP and its residential neighbors, and the city's first-ever neighborhood association.

The Campus Master plan's centrality to the university's future is evident in the university's *Vision 2015*, which calls for "Projecting our history and values in the life and look of the campus." In order to continue to attract top-caliber students and serve the region and state with academic programming the Central Wisconsin economy demands, UWSP needs to move forward with its first campus master plan in 40 years. It provides a roadmap for physical growth and a framework to support academic program and enrollment growth.

Audiences: Stevens Point Common Council; UW Board of Regents; Campus community; Chancellor's Advisory Council; Foundation Advisory Board; UWSP campus neighbors.

Staffing and Budget: Among URC staff who assisted in *Point Forward*, the executive director conceptualized the campaign, facilitated the neighborhood meetings, led media relations, and prepared Chancellor communications; the senior specialist for government relations facilitated Chancellor meetings with alderpersons; the editor assisted with flyer production and door-to-door distribution; the graphic designer designed the Chancellor's PowerPoint; the events coordinator planned the neighborhood meetings; the print shop generated the *Point Forward* buttons and flyers. The university videographer shot segments for the Chancellor's PowerPoint. The Chancellor made several presentations on the plan, she and the vice chancellor for business and finance, and the URC executive director gave media interviews. Expenses were minimal, and included: **Campus Master Plan executive summaries---100 extra copies, \$371.50; 200 *Point Forward* buttons, \$200; 200 *Point Forward* flyers, \$7.50; Refreshments at two neighborhood meetings, \$100; Candy bars to accompany neighborhood meeting flyers, \$8.**

Results: Unanimous Common Council approval of Campus Master Plan after certain defeat had been evident. Now, strong local support signals to state government and to donors that key community backing for the university's growth is in place. *Point Forward* helped overcome dissent and laid the groundwork for improved and lasting community unity. *Point Forward* turned the tide of local opposition to the UWSP Campus Master Plan and resulted in a dramatic, positive outcome with the Common Council, new productive relationships with campus neighbors as the university facilitated the formation of the Old Main Neighborhood Association (OMNA), the first such association in the city's history, and an important signal of local support as the Board of Regents moves forward in ongoing consideration of the university's physical and academic growth plans. After the Regents' preliminary approval of the final Campus Master Plan, followed though, by the uncertain local atmosphere, the Plan was pulled from the October agenda by UWSP. It will be back on the agenda shortly in this new year, with approval now assured. UWSP will host the UW Board of Regents for its October 2008 meeting. At that time, the university plans invite OMNA to unveil its new logo, in development by a university graphic design student, and will coordinate with the city for the placement of logos on street signs within the borders of OMNA.