



BACK TO SCHOOL

STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES OFFER GREAT MEETING SPACES FOR LEARNING

By Amanda N. Wegner

AS a meetings professional, you most likely have a short list of your favorite venues in your Rolodex, on a sticky note at your desk, etched into the back of your mind. But the next time you're looking for a unique setting that's cost-competitive and chockfull of amenities, look into an academic venue, a meeting facility affiliated with Wisconsin's fine universities, colleges and technical colleges.

"When you come to a place like ours, learning is built in," says Bill Mann, Executive Director of Madison's UW Extension Conference Centers, the Pyle Center and the Lowell Center. "For many academic meeting venues, education is at the core of what they do."

Adds Pat Olejniczak, Director of Sales and Hotel Services at St. Norbert's Bemis Center: "We are very comparable, and you have a lot more points of contact for a more personal experience."

Academic meeting venues are an economical alternative to traditional meeting spaces and certainly do not skimp on technology, amenities or accommodations. Here are three academic meeting spaces throughout Wisconsin to consider:



Lunda Center

LUNDA CENTER, LA CROSSE

Located on the Western Technical College campus in La Crosse, the Lunda Center is a professional meeting and learning facility ideal for corporate and community meetings, conferences and seminars. The state-of-the-art center opened in August 2009, and within the first nine months of operation, hosted nearly 700 events serving 18,000 people.

The Lunda Center is, in part, an extension of Western Technical College's Business & Industry Services Division, explains Dan Murphy, Director of the Lunda Center and Food Service. This division arranges training opportunities for businesses in the community, either at the company or in the Lunda Center.

"Technical colleges have unique things to offer," says Murphy, "with trainers and facilitators on staff at the college with diverse expertise.

They are able to bring in trainers from so many different areas and backgrounds. More and more planners are looking to help guide the training process for their groups, and our facility and services are a real resource for that."

The Center offers its 8,000-square-foot Founders Hall, which can accommodate 350 people banquet-style, or 600 attendees theater-style. With its emphasis on training and education, Founders Hall can be divided into six training rooms; there are three additional conference rooms. All nine options are high-technology rooms, adds Murphy, offering a host of audio/visual services and Internet connectivity.

While the Lunda Center was built with the region's business base in mind, it's becoming a go-to center for organizations that need meeting and training space in the La Crosse area. "We're not restricted at all. Anyone who needs training space in the La Crosse area can happily come to the Lunda Center."

UW EXTENSION CONFERENCE CENTERS, MADISON

With gorgeous lakefront views in the heart of the UW-Madison campus, the Lowell and Pyle centers are another way the university facilitates the "Wisconsin Idea," or the principle that education should influence and improve people's lives beyond the university classroom.

"We're the oldest-running university conference center in the country, the roof over the Wisconsin Idea," says Mann. "Our focus is bringing Wisconsin folks to the facility to enrich their lives."

The centers are designed to serve the University of Wisconsin System, state agencies, other educational and governmental groups, and qualified nonprofit organizations. But if your private sector event links back to the university and the centers' mission of "lifelong learning," the Lowell and Pyle centers may be the place for you.

The Pyle Center is the flagship facility, offering over 135,000 square feet of meeting space. The centers draw people from all over the world, serving 80,000 in the facilities each year. To accommodate attendees' needs, an addition to the Lowell Center was just finalized, adding 57 guestrooms, plus other renovations for accessibility and aesthetics. A rooftop terrace overlooking Lake Mendota that accommodates 400 was recently added to the Pyle Center.

Staff event planners can assist with all aspects of your event from start

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Lowell Center

Joe Demaio

to finish; registration services are also available. Technology comes standard in these facilities, and the Pyle Center offers distance education services to connect meeting attendees in Madison with attendees and presenters around the globe.

"We can create a nice program in an academic setting," boasts Mann. "We are proud of what we have, and once people know us, they love us. We're one of the best-kept secrets around."

F.K. BEMIS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTER, DE PERE

The Bemis Center at St. Norbert's College in De Pere "gets a little bit of everything," says Olejniczak. While the center gets its fair share of weddings, reunions and parties on the weekends, "we're known as a training conference center. There are few distractions, well-appointed spaces and a beautiful backdrop. It's perfect for learning," says Olejniczak.



Fort Howard Theater, Bemis Center

The "crown jewel" of the Bemis Center is its Fort Howard Theater, which seats up to 200 and comes with all the

necessary high-tech amenities, including recording technology to preserve presentations for use at a later date. A separate full-service dining room with world-class, creative chefs, conference rooms and two computer labs are also available, as well as the nearby Kress Inn, which offers overnight accommodations. Meeting planners are available, as well as onsite meeting concierge and technology assistance during your event.

Olejniczak notes that the Bemis Center is a sort of a "living endowment. Any monies raised go back to reinvigorate our technology, keep the facility updated and reinvest in college."

Much like the Lunda Center, the Bemis Center is geared toward serving regional clients in northeastern Wisconsin, but is experienced in national events. In conjunction with the Green Bay Packers, the Bemis Center hosted "A Mirror of our Culture: Sport and Society in America" in May, a national conference of sports academics and professionals working in sports-related fields.

"Our unique setting and location in downtown De Pere, right on the banks of the Fox River, makes for a beautiful setting where you get away from day-to-day operations, but still stay engaged and learning in a unique environment." 