



Monona, UW-Madison partner on first 'UniverCity Year' project

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A new UW-Madison initiative to help boost urban sustainability in Wisconsin has landed its first partner: the city of Monona.

The Dane County community will participate in the inaugural “UniverCity Year” project, which will mobilize an army of students enrolled in more than a dozen university courses. Under the guidance of faculty, student teams will work on issues identified by the city as priorities, including housing, transportation, parks and broadband infrastructure.

The yearlong project is an outgrowth of a campus-wide program called the UniverCity Alliance, a joint effort among several UW-Madison units that have been exploring ways to leverage UW expertise to help create more livable cities.

Monona, a community of about 8,000 residents, is surrounded by part of Madison and the shore of Lake Monona. It has been pursuing sustainability initiatives for several years under the leadership of Mayor Bob Miller.

“We’ve been trying to make Monona the best city we can,” says Miller, who has issued environmental declarations throughout his tenure, focusing on water quality, transportation and other causes. The city has also undertaken the largest solar installation of any municipality in the state and has hosted several Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies [capstone courses](#) to work on local projects.

“I perceive this partnership to be priceless for the coming year.”
-Monona Mayor
Bob Miller

That record of commitment appealed to [Jason Vargo](#), an assistant scientist with the Nelson Institute and the Global Health Institute (GHI) at UW-Madison.

“I met Mayor Miller at a Rotary meeting in Madison, where I presented, with other members from GHI, about the livable cities initiative,” says Vargo, the coordinator of the UniverCity Year project. “He mentioned that he would love to collaborate.”

Vargo saw Monona as a great fit, since it’s close to campus and small enough for a low-cost pilot project. He and Nelson Institute Director Paul Robbins made presentations to municipal leaders about the project’s vision and potential. The city council then authorized up to \$50,000 to support the work of UW students and faculty members, in spite of a tight city budget.

“In my five years as mayor, this was the most difficult budget to put together,” says Miller. “But I perceive this partnership to be priceless for the coming year, and the council approved it unanimously.”

Making connections

The [Morgridge Center for Public Service](#), which fosters campus-community partnerships involving UW-Madison students, is helping to match faculty and courses with the city’s priorities.

“Our role is to listen to the needs of Monona and then carefully try to identify people on campus who might be interested in addressing them,” says Morgridge Center Director Katherine Cramer. “Sometimes it’s going to be students, sometimes it’s going to be courses, and sometimes it’s going to be staff and faculty who have an interest in that particular issue.”

According to Monona officials, several projects are ready and waiting – areas of need that have outpaced the capacity of the small city staff.



Jason Vargo, assistant scientist with the Nelson Institute and Global Health Institute, coordinates UniverCity Year.

“The city was able to pull from already identified projects that needed that extra nudge to move forward,” explains Sonja Reichertz, city planner and economic development director. “These are often longer-term, more complex projects that are perfect for student work; the students can lay the groundwork by compiling key data or completing public input and participation processes in the beginning. Any project component left undone can still be carried out by city staff or consultants, while saving money overall.”

So far, more than a dozen UW classes have been connected with the UniverCity Year project, mostly taking place in the fall and spring semesters of the 2016-2017 academic year. They include courses in urban and regional planning (URPL), soil science, landscape architecture, engineering, business, life sciences communication and several other disciplines, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Vargo says each of those classes will tackle specific problems and tasks tied to the priorities identified by the city. At least one overview course will track the progress and effectiveness of the entire partnership.

“One class that will be doing this is URPL's fall workshop, led by Professor Ken Genskow,” Vargo explains. “It’s going to work to ensure collaboration, as well as think about how to evaluate results.”

Other UW programs and classes may also help develop program metrics, including some through UW Extension and the School of Human Ecology.

Listening sessions

Vargo plans to organize mid-semester community meetings that bring together students, community groups and professionals to discuss ideas and receive feedback.

“We hope these events will not only give Monona citizens a way to inform the work and provide students a real-world critique, but that they will also help explore the overlap of courses and projects to generate new ideas,” says Vargo.

The outcomes from the partnership with Monona could also help other communities, not only in Wisconsin, but around the country. UW-Madison’s UniverCity Alliance is part of a national university network called Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities (EPIC-N). Vargo, who serves on the organization’s

steering committee, says information, models and evaluation tools are shared through the network, and those have been essential to the UW project.

More than a dozen UW-Madison classes have been connected with the UniverCity Year project, mobilizing student teams to work on issues identified by Monona as priorities.

“The EPIC-N model is built on being open-source, so materials from established programs are shared among members,” he says. “This has helped immensely in getting the UniverCity Year off the ground in a short time.”

While the Monona project is slated to last one year, additional projects there could follow. But the [UniverCity Alliance](#) – which includes the Nelson Institute, GHI, the Morgridge Center, URPL, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), the Institute for Research on Poverty, the Population Health Institute, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, and UW Extension – intends to partner with a new Wisconsin municipality each year, using the lessons learned from Monona, subsequent partners and the national network to build and improve the program.

And in Monona, a long and successful experience with UW-Madison students and faculty has local officials confident in the UniverCity Year project.

“I expect that the students and faculty will produce high-quality projects at the end of the partnership,” says Reichertz. “And while the final product is critical, the process itself will be just as important, allowing important conversations to develop that are otherwise stuck due to staff time constraints, funding issues or other barriers.”

For more information about the UniverCity Alliance, visit UniverCity.wisc.edu or email univercityalliance@wisc.edu.

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