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**Preparing talent for the AI era****UW-La Crosse receives $400,000 NSF grant to grow innovation-driven business partnerships**

Written by UW-La Crosse University Marketing & Communications

As technology rapidly evolves — especially in areas like artificial intelligence — the demand for a workforce that’s prepared to thrive in these innovative spaces has never been higher. A new federal grant aims to help UW-La Crosse meet that challenge.

UWL has received a $400,000 grant from the National Science Foundation through its [Enabling Partnerships to Increase Innovation Capacity (EPIIC) program](https://www.nsf.gov/funding/opportunities/epiic-enabling-partnerships-increase-innovation-capacity). Over the next three years, the funding will support UWL in building the infrastructure needed to become a hub for innovation-driven business partnerships, with a focus on technologies such as AI.

The grant will help UWL deepen its commitment to community engagement and innovation — key priorities in the university’s [2025-30 strategic plan](https://www.uwlax.edu/info/strategic-plan/).

“This isn’t about telling the community what to do with AI,” says Marie Moeller, associate dean of the College of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities and a principal investigator on the grant. “It’s about listening to what they need. That conversation is what really matters to us.”

**Building capacity for innovation through partnership**

The EPIIC program is designed specifically for smaller, non-R1 institutions with strong potential to expand innovation in partnership with their communities. Unlike most NSF grants, EPIIC selects recipients based on need — offering technical support, grant-writing guidance, and dedicated training to institutions that are often underrepresented in NSF funding.

At UWL, the grant is led by three PIs: Whitney George, associate dean of the College of Science & Health; Moeller; and Betsy Morgan, UWL provost.

“Innovation is always happening in industry,” says George. “But the university’s ability to keep pace — especially with costly new equipment and software — is limited. Building partnerships is an innovative way to address workforce needs while providing real-world learning opportunities for our students.”

**Key outcomes: new faculty fellows, software and listening sessions**

The grant supports several major initiatives to build infrastructure and grow UWL’s capacity for long-term, sustainable partnerships:

* **Faculty fellows**: UWL will bring on three faculty fellows to support Director of Community Engagement Lisa Klein and serve as liaisons between UWL's Community Engaged Learning (CEL) program and each academic college. Their role will be to expand faculty understanding of CEL and strengthen its integration into curricula across campus.
* **Workshops and listening sessions:** UWL will host a series of interactive events with community and industry partners, focused on identifying mutual needs and discovering potential areas for collaboration.
* **Community engagement software:**Funding will also support the purchase of software to manage and sustain community partnerships. This tool will allow UWL to track and maintain external relationships more effectively — ensuring continuity beyond individual faculty or staff involvement.

“You can’t have an institution of our size with just one person serving as the spoke for community engagement,” George says. “We’ve developed a lot over the last ten years related to community engagement. This grant allows us to build a structure that supports everyone’s efforts — and ensures those efforts are seen and sustained.”

**Why UWL?**

UWL has a long-standing commitment to community engagement. More than a decade ago, Moeller and former CBA Dean Laura Milner laid the foundation for this work, advocating for deeper external partnerships. That commitment was formalized in UWL’s 2016 strategic plan, which named community engagement as one of its core pillars and led to the hiring of Klein.

Since then, the CEL program — launched by Klein in 2021  — has grown, connecting students with real-world learning opportunities through community-based projects. The grant will advance this work even further.

“The funding provided by the NSF will help UWL strengthen our capacity to roll up our sleeves and create face-to-face opportunities for businesses and instructors to engage —building mutual understanding around current workforce needs and how the university can continue to prepare students to meet those changing needs,” said Klein. “This grant also gives UWL a chance to better market, measure and share the stories that highlight the value of community engagement, with the goal of expanding our collaborations.”

[UWL’s new strategic plan](https://www.uwlax.edu/info/strategic-plan/), now in its final stages of development, continues to elevate this focus on community engagement. It includes “The Driftless Difference,” as a key pillar, which, in part, aims to deepen UWL’s role as a regional partner and cultural hub by fostering impactful, mutually-beneficial community partnerships.

**A national cohort: strength through collaboration**

UWL is one of five institutions selected to form a cohort through the EPIIC program. These institutions — diverse in size, structure, and location — will collaborate throughout the grant period, sharing resources and learning from each other.

UWL's cohort includes:

* **Estrella Mountain Community College (EMCC)** — 10,000-student Hispanic-Serving Institution near Phoenix, AZ
* **Houston Community College (HCC)** — 85,000-student Hispanic-Serving Institution in Houston, TX
* **SUNY Geneseo**— 4,000-student primarily undergraduate college near Rochester, NY
* **SUNY Polytechnic Institute (SUNY Poly)** — 3,000-student technical institute in Utica, NY

Each institution brings unique strengths and needs to the table. While UWL offers excellence in teaching and a strong commitment to engagement, it is looking to strengthen its infrastructure and grow its capacity in fields like AI. The cohort model ensures that each university benefits from the shared expertise of its peers.

**What’s next?**

At the end of the three-year grant period, UWL will be eligible to apply for additional NSF grants — further expanding its ability to build sustainable, innovation-driven partnerships that benefit both students and the regional economy.

This grant builds on of all the hard work already done at UWL and in the community, starting from the early advocacy work of Milner and Moeller to Klein’s leadership in building initial infrastructure, to faculty who have invested time in integrating engagement into their classroom and the businesses who have partnered with them, George and Moeller say.

“This grant is a way to say: We see you. We value you. And now we’re giving you the tools to take this work even further,” says George.