Martin Saffer deepens UW's MBA program

Editor's note: This is another in an occasional series by the Wyoming Tribune Eagle and Laramie Boomerang highlighting the work being done by faculty at the University of Wyoming.

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CHEYENNE – Degree options are increasing for students in the University of Wyoming's MBA program, thanks in part to Martin Saffer.

He is the director of the program, which has been undergoing reorganization under his supervision.

"They wanted somebody who had an MBA and a business background who could just focus on the MBA program," he said.

Saffer has a history of running MBA programs, having previously been the associate dean of graduate programs at his alma mater, Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Pa.

He returned to Lehigh after a 30-year career with the Ford Motor Company.

Vacationing in Wyoming helped draw him west when the director's position opened at UW, he said.

"(My wife) said to me, 'Well, the only job you're qualified for in the state of Wyoming has become available. What do you want to do?'" he recalled.

When Saffer stepped in as director in 2010, it was the first time the position had not been filled by a rotating series of professors, he said.

"I'm here because I love MBA programs, and they were making some major changes," he said.

UW's MBA program was originally a little "vanilla," said UW professor of accounting Gary Fleischman. But it has been undergoing a renovation that has increased the number and kinds of offerings, he said.

Much of Saffer's work has been outside of the classroom, organizing the new pieces of the program and working with faculty.

"Because he has those executive skills, he's very easy to work with," Fleischman said. "He always tells you what's going on and is extremely level-headed."

In addition to classes, the MBA program has started to offer a leadership program on Fridays, Saffer said. Those sessions bring in business leaders from surrounding communities to meet with MBA students.

The MBA program also offers students a summer opportunity to solve an industry-related problem with a team of classmates, Saffer said. The project gives students hands-on experience.

"I go out and meet with business leaders to find strategic initiatives that they would like investigated," he said.

In addition to the projects outside the classroom, which now includes etiquette work, the coursework also has been expanding.

There had been a longstanding partnership with the UW law school, Saffer said. Now there are similar arrangements with engineering and pharmacy.

The newest of the group is set to be a degree with a focus on the energy sector, Saffer said.

"We're not just a one-resource state; we've got everything," he said. "Partnering with the School of Energy Resources, we're able to complement the needs there and the great investment the state has made."

Two versions of the energy-related MBA are in the works and are set to start in the fall.

The shorter concentration offers students several energy management classes. The almost two-year MBA in energy management has a wider range of courses, Saffer said.

One class he is anticipating teaches students skills like energy trading and hedging. An example would be how to buy fuel on an oil freighter that might take months to deliver. "They'll learn techniques on how do you negotiate the price and how you do hedging programs to protect yourself," he said.

Fleischman said the changes to the MBA program already have started to attract students with a larger amount of business experience.

"It's something that we're all excited about and hoping the state will become excited about it," he said. "The MBA is supposed to be the flagship program of a business school and I believe it will now become (that)."

At a glance

Director Martin Saffer has helped to put new programs in place through UW's School of Business that offer students the chance to get a joint MBA or one that focuses on the energy sector.