UW System working to link with businesses

By Pamela Powers
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MENOMONIE — As the UW System Office of Economic Development gets up and running, one of its main tasks will be linking businesses to the UW System via the Internet, a system official said Thursday.

The state has about 157,300 businesses that employ 2.3 million workers in various industries, with manufacturing at the core, said David Brukardt, associate vice president for economic development for the UW System. Ninety-four percent of those companies are small businesses.

Some small businesses already work with universities, but UW System officials hope to boost the state's economy by connecting more companies with Wisconsin universities, Brukardt said Thursday during the Board of Regents Research, Economic Development and Innovation Committee meeting at UW-Stout in Menomonie.

The meeting was part of a series of UW System Board of Regents meetings Thursday and today in Menomonie.

One challenge to growing new businesses in Wisconsin is a shortage of investment capital, said Paul Jadin, Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. secretary.

"There is a shortage of $300 to $350 million a year in investment capital in Wisconsin," he said.

Jadin said he plans to seek half that money from the state with the private sector raising the remainder.

Menomonie-area business leaders told committee members the UW-Stout Discovery Center, created in 2009 to support economic development while enhancing students' business educations, has had a positive impact that could serve as a model for future endeavors.

Tracy Lundberg, owner and general manager of BTL Food Group in Eau Claire, said she is working with several departments in the UW System to get a condiment product line developed, marketed and launched.
UW-Stout students soon will help with taste tasting of the products, potentially allowing BTL officials to boost business, Lundberg said.

"I've had great experiences with everyone I've worked with so far," she said.

Rock Eiden, owner of Shape Products in Menomonie, agreed. The company produces thermal molded window well covers as well as other plastic products.

Eiden said he eventually would like to see a class project in which students determine whether they can manufacture a product and compete with China.

Bill Bockes, president of Johnson Electric Coil Co. in Antigo, which makes industrial transformers and inductors, said working with the Discovery Center has stabilized that business and given it long-term prospects, helping retain 80 jobs.

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