

IN THE NEWS Inaugural career networking event held for UW-Parkside student-athletes at De Simone Arena

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OMERS — Be authentic, find your passion, be open to change: These were among some of the life skills a group of local business executives shared with a group of college student-athletes at an event promoting the virtues of career networking.

The University of Wisconsin-Parkside's athletics department held its inaugural career networking night Tuesday at the De Simone Arena, and the program included a number of events, including the panel discussion that was geared toward the UWP athletes in attendance. The talk, however, could have seamlessly translated to any college student or a working adult seeking a career change.

The panelists represented a cross-section of industries and included Omair Ahmed, chief strategy officer of Nexus Pharmaceuticals; Toni Hansen, human resources director with Haribo; S.R. Mills, CEO of Bear Real Estate Group; Keith Smith, president of Vonco; and Nick Smith, vice president of medical group operations with Advocate Aurora Health's east corridor.

Throughout the nearly hour-long discussion, the participants were asked to give their take on such issues as the changing nature of work — particularly in a post-pandemic world — and how to pursue the age-old question of seeking out jobs that are the right fit.

At times, the conversation was frank and based on some of the experiences the panelists endured in their younger adult lives.

While in college, for example, Hansen said she worked full-time and went to school-full time.

"I was very proud to say I graduated with no debt," Hansen said, offering the caveat that tuition then was lower than today's rates. "I was paying for my degree as I went."

But the heavy load, she said, did come at a cost that included sidelining involvement in some of the extra-curricular activities and clubs that were available.

"I would say don't do what I did. I didn't maximize my college experience as much as I could have," Hansen said. "I will tell you what I tell my kids now, because I do want them to maximize their college experience. Get involved."





While specific professions obviously have tailor-made job duties and requirements, several of the panelists touched on the importance of honing soft skills that are fundamental for a majority of today's jobs and also translate to life outside the workplace.

From his vantage point, Mills said a small dose of authenticity goes a long way.

"Be honest. You don't have to be expected to know everything," Mills said. "It's OK to admit that. I think being genuine translates."

Within the realm of healthcare, Nick Smith said communication is key as one staffer shares critical information about a patient with another.

"It's very much like a sports team," Nick Smith said. "We're a team caring for a patient because they have so many areas. The skills really translate, no matter what industry you're in."

While it is a lifelong pursuit, Keith Smith said Vonco has fostered a climate of ensuring employees hone in on their strengths and weaknesses.

"We spend a lot of time on my leadership team making sure people are working on themselves and understanding who they are and what they bring to the table," Keith Smith said. "That allows us to then care more about each other."

Since the onset of the pandemic two years ago, there have been a number of changes, including the workplace itself.

At Nexus Pharmaceuticals, Ahmed said the company is an example of some of the workforce shifts that have occurred.

"There are so many more remote positions. Some are hybrid," Ahmed said. "The work-life balance has really changed."

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