

Students flock to land-surveying program

SCSU offers only 4-year degree in state

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Ken Wong is a busy man.

The assistant professor and director of the land-surveying program at St. Cloud State University teaches eight courses a semester and juggles the needs of the 100 students in his program.

But Wong isn't complaining.

St. Cloud State offers the only four-year land-surveying program in Minnesota, where registered land surveyors must have a bachelor's degree. About 20 other states have the same requirement.

America's rich history of land surveying — and the promise of working outdoors — drives many students to choose careers in the field.

A land surveyor's primary responsibility is to as-

semble a plat and define property lines by staking out lots for houses, Wong said. That work is crucial to an area's growth and development.

A shortage of land surveyors statewide means the enrollment boom in St. Cloud State's program is good news.

The program has more than 100 students this fall compared with 22 in 2000. Programs at other universities suffer from declining enrollment.

Minnesota has about 450 surveyors; Wisconsin has 1,900, and about 60 percent of the state's land surveyors are older than 50.

Last year, only three of Wong's 12 graduating students were looking for a job by the time commencement rolled around.

"As long as I've been here, I've never seen such a



Photo courtesy of Ken Wong

Ken Wong, assistant professor and director of the land surveying program at St. Cloud State University (second from right), leads students through a land surveying class. St. Cloud State offers Minnesota's only bachelor's degree program in land surveying.

surge of interest in such a unique area like land surveying," said Lewis Wixon, chairman of the geography

department.

"I think St. Cloud's got pretty much the lock on the market here on survey-

ing," said Charles Mitchell, a senior who transferred

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Surveying

after completing the program at St. Cloud Technical College.

'More toys'

The potential earning power of land surveyors is an added attraction.

Minnesota land surveyors make more money than those in Wisconsin, Wong said. A land surveying graduate from St. Cloud State should earn a starting salary of more than \$40,000, he said.

"We are a profession that has a lot of high technology, a lot of expensive equipment, more toys to play with," Wong said. "We have more computers than anybody would want to play with."

A career in land surveying also provides new challenges every day, senior Joshua Stern said.

"You're not stuck behind a desk 40 hours a week," he said. "There's not a job that's the same."

The program at St. Cloud State started in 1995. Only 30 universities nationwide offer a bachelor's degree in the field, Wong said.

One of the goals was to give Minnesota students a place to get that required degree, said Dennis Pederson, chairman of the Minnesota Society of Professional Surveyors education committee.

"It's always been, historically, an apprenticeship style of learning," but that has changed, Pederson said.

Time and money

The university works with at least 13 two-year colleges in the region and is working to boost its teaching staff.

"Students, when they came here, there were not enough surveying courses, (and) no one to answer their questions or promote the program," Wong said.

University leaders have approved the search for another professor for fall semester.

The program also gets help from state organizations such as the professional surveyors and the Minnesota Surveyors and Engineers Society, Wong said.

The groups have contributed

money for scholarships, equipment and software, Wixon said.

Since fall 2000, contributions from the groups and a match from the university have totaled almost \$100,000, Wixon said. Last year, surveying students received \$19,000 in scholarships.

"In terms of dollars, surveyors are a privileged crew here," Wong said.

More scholarships were awarded Friday at the professional surveyors convention in St. Cloud.

One scholarship, awarded for the first time, honored Robert Bixby, a St. Cloud State geography professor who died last year. Bixby had detected the need for the surveying program, Wixon said.

Wixon believes the program will continue to grow, and he's worried that the university will have to limit the number of students it accepts, he said.

"Nationally, there's a lot of public interest in this whole area of land surveying," Wixon said.

Senior Taylor Schulte, who started working alongside his land surveyor dad when he was 13, agreed.

"I love the research and the history of the whole United States," he said. "The first people to go through it were the surveyors, the challenge of finding out what to do and when to do it."