NEWS RELEASE

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Career-ready competition: UW-Stout students have leadership impact at SkillsUSA, Science Olympiad events

Hundreds of middle, high school students gain science and job skills in on-campus contests

Story Link
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Menomonie, Wis. – SkillsUSA and Wisconsin Science Olympiad are programs designed to help middle and high school students develop engineering, science, and workforce skills, but they've also given University of Wisconsin-Stout students opportunities to develop their own leadership abilities.

This spring, dozens of UW-Stout students served as volunteers and judges for SkillsUSA and Science Olympiad state and regional competitions on the UW-Stout campus as well as in Madison.

These experiences complement the applied learning that is core to UW-Stout's identity as Wisconsin's Polytechnic University.

"Student participation in events like the Wisconsin Science Olympiad and SkillsUSA is vital because it transforms learning into action," said Tiffany Hoage, College of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Management project coordinator. "By taking on roles in planning, coordination and event facilitation, students gain hands-on experience that builds critical skills such as leadership, communication, problem-solving and teamwork."

This spring, UW-Stout students' hard work helped make possible three events:

- The Wisconsin Science Olympiad State Tournament, which brought more than 1,300 middle and high school students to campus April 4-5.

- The SkillsUSA Wisconsin Regional Competition, which included about 300 sixth-through-12th graders from 35 schools Feb. 27-28.

- The SkillsUSA State Competition at the Alliant Energy Center in Madison on April 1-2, where UW-Stout students and faculty members organized and oversaw the Team Engineering Challenge, one of the largest contests in the event.

"These opportunities allow students to apply what they've learned in the classroom to real-world situations, enhancing their confidence, professionalism and career readiness," Hoage said. "Involvement also strengthens their resumes, expands their networks and helps them stand out to future employers – all while contributing to impactful, community-focused events."

SkillsUSA focused on career education

SkillsUSA is a nationwide organization that provides educational programs, events, and competitions focused on career and technical education. UW-Stout has hosted SkillsUSA events for more than four decades.

Sean McNeill, a senior mechanical engineering major from Rosemount, Minnesota, was one of 16 UW-Stout students who helped at the SkillsUSA State Competition. McNeill helped create the engineering challenge – in this case, building models of homes that could withstand flooding and tornado-strength winds – that students had to tackle during the competition. At the event in Madison, McNeill also answered questions, ran group interviews and judged the students' prototypes.

"I loved seeing the engineering process developing right in front of me. These young students attacked the problem in so many unique ways," McNeill said. "Seeing the creativity of all the students there was awe-inspiring. It was also great to see them not give in to the feeling of failure, which is a constant in the field of engineering."

Even if what they had built failed the ultimate tests, McNeill explained, some students would continue to tweak their designs although the competition was almost over. "That is the essence of engineering that I have fallen in love with and the reason I am in the major to begin with," he said.

First-year student Harshita Sharma, an applied science and engineering technology major from Ahmedabad, India, helped with both the regional and state SkillsUSA events. She helped with contest design, problem statements, testing ideas, judging and more – all while working with teenage competitors. "As expected, some would listen to the instructions, some would require repeating it and some wouldn't listen," she said. "But it was fascinating to see how knowledgeable they were about the subject. I saw some great ideas in the answers to the problem statement and also understood the difference between the teaching curriculum in India and the U.S."

Sharma added that volunteering at the competitions helped her develop skills in organizing events, crafting engineering problem statements, working with fellow students and developing her self-confidence.

Many of the student volunteers are part of UW-Stout's Technology and Engineering Education Collegiate Association, which provides leadership opportunities for future educators. Assistant Professor Mike Mills, the technology education program director, is advisor of the TEECA chapter and is a former SkillsUSA state director.

Assistant Professor Abhimanyu Ghosh, engineering and technology, who coordinated the Team Engineering Challenge in Madison alongside Assistant Professor Oai Ha, said the event provided an applied learning opportunity for both the UW-Stout student judges and the student competitors.

“We wanted the activity to be something related to engineering’s social role,” Ghosh said of the construction of flood- and wind-resistant housing during the engineering challenge. “We wanted them to think about something that is socially responsible.”

Science Olympiad offers learning for competitors, volunteers

Just a few days after the SkillsUSA State Competition in Madison, about 1,300 middle and high school students took part in the Wisconsin Science Olympiad State Tournament at UW-Stout on April 4-5. The middle and high school students, who represented more than 70 schools, engaged in a track-meet style competition that consisted of dozens of events focused on chemistry, physics, mechanical engineering, geology and other scientific disciplines. Some events were exam-based, while during others students demonstrated projects they had built beforehand, such as robots or helicopters.

Hoage said the Science Olympiad tournament required several hundred volunteers, including about 50 UW-Stout students, many of them part of an event management class taught by Professor Kristal Gerdes.

Among those students was Lily Meyer, who is pursuing a double major in business administration and hotel, restaurant and tourism management. Meyer served as Hoage’s personal assistant during the competition, doing everything from creating slideshows and playlists to setting up ceremonies.

“It really showed me the importance of putting yourself out there and seeing how things operate. In our event class, we’re always talking about the steps it takes to plan an event, but actually being there, seeing it and doing it really showed me a different side of the event industry,” said Meyer, a junior from Cedar Grove.

Hoage said she hopes to get even more UW-Stout students from multiple disciplines to help with these events in the future.

UW-Stout, a member of the Universities of Wisconsin, is Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University, with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes. Learn more via the FOCUS2030 strategic plan.

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Photos

Competitors work in a lab at UW-Stout during the Wisconsin Science Olympiad State Tournament on April 5, 2025. (Photo by Steve Duerst)

Competitors work on a project during the Wisconsin Science Olympiad State Tournament April 5, 2025, at UW-Stout. (Photo by Steve Duerst)

Students compete in the Team Engineering Challenge at the SkillsUSA State Tournament April 2, 2025, in Madison. (Photo by Abhimanyu Ghosh)

UW-Stout students help at the SkillsUSA Regional Competition Feb. 28, 2025.

UW-Stout students judge a competitor’s project at the SkillsUSA State Competition in Madison. (Photo by Abhimanyu Ghosh)