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New Partnership with Minnesota State University, Mankato

Lets Iron Range Students Complete Engineering Degrees without Leaving Home

Mankato, Minn. – Iron Range students now can complete their engineering degrees without leaving home, thanks to a new partnership between Minnesota State University, Mankato and the Northeast Minnesota Higher Education District, based in Chisholm.

The partnership lets two-year students from the five Northeast Minnesota Higher Education District community colleges obtain four-year mechanical engineering degrees from Minnesota State Mankato.

A ceremony celebrating the new Arrowhead University Consortium Iron Range Engineering Initiative partnership will be held Thursday, Sept. 10, at Mesabi Range Community & Technical College in Virginia, Minn., where officials from the collaborating institutions will sign a memorandum of agreement.

After two years of traditional engineering studies at the community colleges, students in the program study and work with engineers at industries throughout northeast Minnesota.

“This is a national model for engineering schools of the future,” said Minnesota State Mankato President Richard Davenport. “Students can complete their degrees in or near their hometowns, learning by experience with technical instruction from some of the state’s best mechanical engineering faculty members.”

“This is education-based economic development,” added Sue Collins, president of the Northeast Higher Education District, which governs five autonomous northeastern Minnesota two-year colleges. “This is a step and a commitment to retain our youth in our region, discourage outmigration, attract other students to the Iron Range and increase our talent pool.”

Students attend classes at Mesabi Range Community & Technical College (campuses in Eveleth and Virginia, Minn.). They hear lectures and gain practical experience at Iron Range manufacturing plants, including Northshore Mine, PolyMet and the Soudan Underground Laboratory.

Ron Ulseth, engineering instructor at Itasca Community College and director of the program, said the partnership “will explore a completely different way of approaching engineering education. Each semester, students will work on several externally sponsored projects. It is a hands-on, project-based, industry-driven curriculum.”

The five colleges partnering with Minnesota State Mankato are Hibbing Community College, Itasca Community College in Grand Rapids, Mesabi Range Community & Technical College, Rainy River Community College in International Falls and Vermilion Community College, Ely. Classes are taught by instructors from the five colleges and by faculty from Minnesota State Mankato. Fifteen students are registered for the fall program, and officials expect 25 to register in each ensuing year.

The partnership is funded with a \$1.1-million grant from the Iron Range Resources Board. Seed money (\$50,000) was provided by the Minnesota Center for Engineering & Manufacturing Excellence, part of Minnesota State Mankato's College of Science, Engineering & Technology. "I'm delighted that the university, the Northeast Minnesota Higher Education District and Iron Range manufacturers are collaborating to increase higher education opportunities on the Range," said Ronald Bennett, executive director of the Minnesota Center for Engineering & Manufacturing Excellence. Bennett helped guide curriculum development for the program. "The whole idea of higher education programs like this is something that I've been working on over decades," added State Rep. Tom Rukavina of Virginia, Minn., chairman of the House Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee. "I really think this program is going to take off. Hopefully, we will be able to expand and have more four-year educational programs on the Iron Range. I hope it's innovative enough to attract students from all over the country and all over the world."

The Iron Range has a long history of mining, ore processing and paper production, which in turn has generated a strong demand for engineers trained in numerous disciplines. Demand has increased in the last several years as hundreds of technicians and engineers have retired from the Range's mines, power plants and paper mills.

Those who are interested in more information about this and other Northeast Minnesota Higher Education District engineering partnerships may visit the Arrowhead University Consortium Web site at <http://www.arrowheadu.com>.

Minnesota State Mankato, a comprehensive, doctoral university with 14,800 students and two satellite sites, is part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, which comprises 32 institutions across the state.

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