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Starting Early: Workforce Development in Plastics

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Touring PlastiVan Exposes Today's Students to Tomorrow's Careers

The traditional gift for a 20th anniversary is china, but for a traveling educational exhibit in its second decade of reaching students from 5th to 12th grades, the operative material is plastics.

The Society of Plastics Engineers' PlastiVan™ program recently visited Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport, as well as two area schools, providing nearly 2,000 students with a hands-on opportunity to explore rewarding and high-paying careers in manufacturing.

The visit was sponsored by Sekisui SPI, of Bloomsburg, PA, which has also established two \$7,000 scholarships for the Fall 2017 semester at Penn College.

"A lot of us who have been involved with SPE and plastics in general look around and we see that we're all graying, and it's hard to get students to understand the opportunity," SPE Foundation Director Eve Vitale said. "There's a lot of STEM education and so they say, 'Well, I'm going to be a nurse or a doctor or an engineer,' but they don't realize that the plastics industry very specifically needs help. And they don't understand the depth or the breadth of things they could do."

In addition to explaining the structure and history of polymers, including such innovations as sodium polyacrylate (the absorbent gel in disposable diapers), nylon, Kevlar – even the green slime popularized in "Ghostbusters" – the students get a literal feel for the field of plastics.

"One way to really, really engage students is to get them doing hands-on things

right away," Vitale said, "because that's a fun way to learn and it shows them what their world can be like."

And whether a chemistry student visiting a college lab or a Girl Scout working on a STEM project, that world is wide open.

"They can be polymer scientists, they can be chemists and they can work on really cool, new materials. They can work on the design of things, they can work in the automotive industry, they can design things for our cars that make us safer," Vitale said, expanding that list with the near-endless possibilities involving such familiar items as games, phones and sports equipment.

"If they are really interested in how things are made, we need really good talent in manufacturing plants to make those processes run smoothly and to design them so that they're efficient and clean and safe."

"Sekisui's sponsorship of the SPE PlastiVan, which spent five days educating area 5th - through 12th-graders through hands-on learning activities, is an investment in the future workforce in the plastics industry," said Shannon M. Munro, executive director of Workforce Development & Continuing Education at the college. "Awareness of the plastics industry and what it means to Pennsylvania as one of the largest sectors in manufacturing is critical



to its continued success, and we were pleased to be part of the events on campus and at Bloomsburg and Central Columbia high schools.”

Many of the students involved in the presentation and lab experiments were amazed at the pervasiveness of plastics in their lives, touching virtually every aspect of their day.

“I would love to see a documentary where all of a sudden, all of the plastic was just gone,” Vitale said. “And what would be left? It’s hard to even imagine. We would have wood ... and metal ... and stone.”

Penn College, which has built strong relationships with Sekisui SPI and the Society of Plastics Engineers, was an ideal venue for the traveling resource.

Its School of Industrial, Computing & Engineering Technologies offers two ABET-accredited majors: a bachelor’s degree in plastics and polymer engineering technology and an associate degree in plastics and polymer technology.

In addition, the school is home to the Plastics Innovation & Resource Center, one of the nation’s top facilities for research, development and education related to injection molding, extrusion, blow molding, rotational molding and thermoforming.

For more about the college, a national leader in applied technology education and workforce development, visit www.pct.edu, email admissions@pct.edu or call toll-free 800-367-9222. |



Did you know
the SPE Foundation offers numerous scholarships to students who have demonstrated or expressed an interest in the plastics industry? www.4spe.org/Foundation