UW-Stout’s new mechanical engineering major drawing students

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MENOMONIE — Incoming freshman Jordan Roessler planned to attend UW-Stout because of its co-op educational opportunities and reputation for its graduates finding employment.
Roessler originally planned to major in plastics engineering. However, in April, when the UW Board of Regents approved a mechanical engineering major at the university, he decided to change course.

“It is even more broad and gives me so many more opportunities,” he said. “I would like to work with making things that can help the environment or improve efficiency.”

So far about 49 students have enrolled in the major, said Devin Berg, UW-Stout program director for mechanical engineering and an assistant professor.

“It meets the demand of regional employers we partner with,” Berg said. “It meets what students have been asking for.”

The closest mechanical engineering degree geographically to UW-Stout is at the University of St. Thomas in the Twin Cities. Other UW System schools offering the degree are UW-Platteville, UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee.

The degree prepares students for careers involving the design and manufacture of nearly everything, from micro-scale objects to medical devices and airplanes. Mechanical engineers design new machines, research the latest technology and work in teams with other professionals to convert ideas into real products, according to the program’s website.

UW-Stout Chancellor Bob Meyer said adding the program was a natural progression given the campus’ existing engineering programs.

UW-Stout already offered engineering curriculum through its computer engineering, manufacturing engineering and plastics engineering programs. The university also offers a popular engineering technology program.

“I knew that our mechanical engineering program would be popular because it is addressing a vital need for more engineers in northwest Wisconsin,” said Meyer, an engineer himself. “Our business and industry partners told us loud and clear that they need more locally produced mechanical engineers, and I am overjoyed that we are starting to fulfill that need.”

Within five years the program is projected to have 200 students enrolled, Berg said.
Joining forces

UW-Stout has joined with UW-Eau Claire and UW-River Falls to form the Northwest Wisconsin Engineering Consortium. The schools will agree on a common engineering core curriculum and share other resources, meaning for the first time those schools will have common curriculum allowing students to transfer between the schools without losing credits, Berg said.

UW-Eau Claire will offer a new degree in materials science and engineering beginning in fall 2016. Twenty-five new freshmen are expected to enroll in the materials science and engineering program each year, and by the end of the fifth year, it is expected that 84 students will be enrolled and approximately 29 engineers will have graduated from the program, according to a news release from UW-Eau Claire.

UW-River Falls’ agricultural engineering program is scheduled to be approved by the Board of Regents on Friday. If that occurs, the campus would offer the major in fall 2016 with projections calling for 15 students the first year.

National and state reports have indicated that demand for mechanical engineers will increase during the next decade. A UW System report said that in northwestern Wisconsin, 597 mechanical engineers were needed and the supply was just 97.

A UW-Stout commissioned report revealed a 91 percent increase in job postings for employees with mechanical engineering skills from January 2010 to December 2013 in 31 northern and western Wisconsin counties, a news release stated.