Brian Finder, a professor in operations and management, works with STEPS for Girls participants recently in the foundry at Fryklund Hall on the UW-Stout campus in Menomonie.

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**July 15, 2012**

**STEPS in the right direction**

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — Girls are exploring the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics thanks to the 16th annual STEPS for Girls program at UW-Stout.

Campus organizers have educational and fun activities planned for the 160 girls who signed up for the four weeklong programs.

The program consists of hands-on sessions in labs for packaging, plastics, electronics, automation, foundry and computer-aided design. Instruction will be in physics, chemistry, math, information technology, graphic arts and Web design.

On Monday, the first day of this year’s session of the Science, Technology and Engineering Preview Summer (STEPS), one group of girls donned safety glasses as they entered the foundry in Fryklund Hall.
Professor Brian Finder showed them how to use a bellows and had them stand back as he poured molten metal into molds they helped build.

Including this year, more than 2,500 girls have participated since the program began in 1997. “STEPS for Girls is an unqualified success,” said Brenda Puck, an instructor in the engineering and technology department who took over as STEPS director in 2010 from founder Pete Heimdahl.

The program is for girls entering seventh grade, with the goal of sparking their interest in traditionally male-dominated career fields.

A fundamental component of the program is to inspire participants to select the appropriate courses in middle and high school to prepare them for majors and careers in science, technology and engineering-related fields. All activities are presented by university STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) faculty or professionals in the field; most of those presenting are women. Many UW-Stout students and departments are involved in the program, including two UW-Stout alumnae — Brianne Maier and Jenny Brownell — who are packaging engineers at General Mills.

A total of 35 high school girls who previously attended the program help as junior counselors and lab assistants.

“They want to make a difference in another girl’s life,” Puck said.

Future plans

Program organizers already are making plans for 2013, when the program will take on a slightly more futuristic feel.

The weeklong project that ties together the STEM fields will switch from building a remotecontrolled model boat to an autonomous robot.

Puck and Turner Howard, program technical coordinator, said the robot project will create new learning opportunities while continuing to provide hands-on experience in modern manufacturing.

“Girls will be able to see the manufacturing process at its best,” Pucks said. “We’re always trying to improve and change things.”

Howard, an adjunct faculty member in the STEM College, began coordinating the robot project during the 2011-12 school year. Development of the mobile bots, slightly larger than an upside-down cereal bowl, has involved many sponsor companies, as well as UW-Stout students and faculty from manufacturing engineering, plastics engineering, industrial design and graphic design.

Sponsors fund about 35 percent of the STEPS program, with tuition covering 40 percent and UW-Stout 25 percent of costs.

“Without sponsors’ support the program would not be possible,” said Glendali Rodriguez, an associate
professor in the construction program and STEPS scholarship coordinator.

The second week of the program, which kicks off today, coincides with the American Society for Quality STEM Agenda Conference at UW-Stout on Monday and Tuesday.

Puck and Wendy Stary, assistant professor in engineering and technology, will present a paper on the program at the conference and lead a tour for attendees.