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SPANNING THE GLOBE

WCJC Nuclear Power Tech program garners worldwide attention

BAY CITY, TEXAS – From presentations at nuclear conferences to visits with European researchers, Wharton County Junior College's Nuclear Power Technology program is attracting worldwide attention.

Rudolph Henry, WCJC's director of Nuclear Power Technology, said the program has generated such interest due to the increasing need for a skilled workforce that can manage and operate a nuclear power plant.

"As more nuclear power plants are being planned for construction in different parts of the world, emphasis is being placed on nuclear power plant worker training in the various disciplines required to operate such plants," Henry said.

Henry noted that WCJC's Bay City Campus offers three critical training disciplines relevant to today's power plants: Operations, Electrical Technicians and Instrumentation & Controls Technicians. A visit to the campus this past summer by two Czech Republic researchers was aimed at gaining a better understanding of these training methods, Henry noted.

"They came to WCJC to inquire as to how we train students to become nuclear professionals to work in commercial nuclear power plants," Henry said.

This isn't the first time WCJC's program has attracted such interest. Reports on the program have been made at several worldwide conferences over the past 14 months. These include the European Nuclear Society Conference in Manchester, England, in December of 2012; the Nuclear Engineering Science Technology Conference in Madrid, Spain, in November of 2013; and, most recently, the Czech Nuclear Education Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, back in February.

Dr. Bruce Kieler, WCJC's grant writing coordinator, made the presentations on behalf of the college. Kieler has firsthand knowledge of the program after assisting Henry in authoring the conference reports. Further assistance was provided by Brazosport College's Rebecca Shawver.

Kieler said the reports provided details of the WCJC Nuclear Power Tech program's establishment, development and accomplishments. The documents further highlighted the collaborative efforts that were crucial to the program's implementation and success. A few of the

entities singled out were the Bay City Community Development Corp., the South Texas Project Nuclear Operating Company (STP), the Nuclear Power Institute and the Texas Engineering Experiment Station at Texas A&M University.

Such collaborations are a large part of the success of the Bay City Campus' programs. Earlier this year, the facility announced a partnership with Tenaris –a worldwide leader in piping and tubing for the oil and gas industry – that will include the creation of a Manufacturing Technology AAS degree.

Kieler said the international community has recognized WCJC's Nuclear Technology program as a model for two-year training programs. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2011 even named the WCJC program as a "best practice" institution among two-year nuclear technology training programs worldwide.

"They are very aware of the excellence of the WCJC program," Kieler said.

European schools may even begin sending their students to WCJC for training at the Bay City Campus, Kieler noted. He pointed specifically to the Brno University of Technology in the Czech Republic.

"The electrical engineering program at Brno University is very interested in the Wharton Nuclear Technology program," Kieler said, adding that the Czech Ministry of Education and the European Union's Social Fund for the Czech Republic paid for his travel expenses to the recent conference in Prague in the hopes of promoting "educational collaborations between Czech technical education programs and American programs."

That collaboration included a visit this past August to the Bay City Campus by two Czech Republic researchers, Jan Varmuza, 28, and Michal Ptacek, 29. Both are doctoral level students in electrical engineering, teach at Brno University and have studied and conducted research at nuclear facilities in central Europe and Russia.

"This is yet another example of how WCJC's Nuclear Power Technology Program is attracting worldwide attention," Henry said of the visit.

Kieler accompanied the students on the tour of the Bay City Campus as well as on a tour of STP. He was impressed with the young men's understanding of nuclear technology.

"They had extensive knowledge of the various types of nuclear power plants, reactor cores, process technology issues, nuclear chemistry, spent fuel issues and electricity transmission issues," Kieler said. "They asked very good questions and I learned a lot just from being with them on the tour."

Ptacek said his goal in making the long journey was to get a better understanding of the similarities – and differences – of nuclear power production in various parts of the world.

"I wanted to obtain more information about how people do the same thing abroad," Ptacek said.

According to Varmuza, nuclear power facilities in the Czech Republic are rarely accessible through authorized escorted tours. In some cases, even researchers like Varmuza and Ptacek are prohibited from accessing more sensitive areas, even through authorized escorted tours.

As for the WCJC Nuclear Power Technology program, both men said they were impressed by what they saw. Having a convenient and highly respected training program like WCJC's is something many communities could only wish for.

Kieler said the engineering department at Brno University – of which Varmuza and Ptacek are a part – has expressed a “strong interest” in learning as much as it can about WCJC's program.

They are considering “using it as a model for developing similar training programs in central Europe,” Kieler said. “The faculty members pointed out that the nuclear power industry in Europe is facing the same task of recruiting and training thousands of young men and women who will be needed in the near future to replace the current energy workforce, which is nearing retirement age.”

For more information on the Nuclear Power Technology program, visit the WCJC website at: www.wcjc.edu

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