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Engineering a Success Story

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Five years ago, the University of Dayton School of Engineering was discussing budget cuts and layoffs. Today, it's preparing to enroll its largest first-year class.

This is despite a national decline in the number of engineering bachelor's degrees being awarded nationwide last year and recent freshman enrollment data indicating this trend may continue for the next several years, according to the American Society for Engineering Education.

"This is at a time when most everyone is going down. That says something," said Joe Saliba, University of Dayton interim provost and former engineering dean. "We leave no stone unturned (while recruiting students)."

First-year enrollment is at an all-time high of 379, up from 225 just six years ago. A third of the students have not declared a major. Among those who have declared, mechanical engineering leads the way with 81 students, chemical engineering has 60 and engineering technology has 45.

For engineering technology, that's a nearly 100 percent increase from last year's enrollment of 23. Saliba said the program has received a boost from the school's partnership with China's Shanghai Normal University.

According to American Society for Engineering Education statistics from the 2006-07 school year, UD ranks in the top 40 in the total number of students enrolled in engineering technology, overall engineering technology degrees awarded and engineering technology degrees awarded to females.

All first-year students will be part of the school's first integrated core curriculum. The new curriculum's goal is to give all engineering students a common skill set.

"Over many decades, each engineering discipline has been in a silo," Saliba said. "Students don't take any classes outside their disciplines. So, when they graduate, mechanical engineers aren't able to talk to chemical engineers, engineers aren't able to talk to business majors, and so on."

Odds are that engineering students who come to UD will stay at UD. Saliba said UD's School of Engineering retains and graduates students at rates higher than the national average. The school's retention rate is 80 percent versus 50 percent nationally. The four-year graduation rate is 70 percent as opposed to the national average of around 30 percent, Saliba said.

While they are here, students can conduct research on campus and at nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. American Society for Engineering Education statistics from the 2006-07 school year show that UD ranked 27th nationally, ahead of Duke University and John Hopkins University, in engineering research expenditures.

Saliba believes more international engineering students would come to U.S. schools if it weren't for post-9/11 regulations. He has noticed more international engineering students heading to Holland, England, Belgium, France and Australia rather than the U.S.

"I was at one college fair with 35,000 Chinese students looking to go overseas. Dutch schools had 24 booths there. The U.S. had just one," Saliba said.

Saliba feels that lack of science, technology, engineering and math education in K-12 schools, reduced starting engineering salaries and media reports about layoffs and outsourcing at companies that employ many engineers are among the reasons why American students are shying away from engineering.