

UNIVERSITY OF BRIDGEPORT

Engineering school booming



Phil Noel/Connecticut Post

University of Bridgeport School of Engineering Dean Tarek Sobh checks the progress of a robot built from a former wheelchair by robotics students. Below, Mohannad Abuzneid, of Jordan, joins other engineering students working on computers in one of the new engineering labs at the University of Bridgeport.

College's high enrollment has created a need for more space

By **ROB VARNON**
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On a recent fall day, the smell of fresh paint hung in the air at the University of Bridgeport School of Engineering, where Dean Tarek Sobh gave a rapid-fire talk and tour of the school, which hit a record high in enrollment this year.

Sobh has much to be excited about these days. Grant money is rolling in from a variety of sources, including NASA, students are winning contests and finding jobs with major corporations. And, most importantly, they are choosing to come to UB.

"This is really unprecedented," Sobh said of the growth. UB's engineering school, with 1,250 students, is among the top three for enrollment in New England.

It's grown so fast, over the summer the school reclaimed space it had virtually abandoned during the last decade. UB converted the old mechanical workshop — where students used to learn about factory machinery — into a modern office and computer lab complex. Sobh said there were old machines in the workshop, which had also been used to fix cars and build parade floats.

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Engineering school's enrollment is booming

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Earlier this month, Sobh hustled down the hall of the Technology Building, which adjoins the mechanical workshop — pointing out posters explaining the projects that have been bringing in grant money.

The posters are all in English, according to Sobh, who translates "Kinematic Synthesis of Robotic Manipulators from task descriptions," into a project that aims to improve the design and function of robotic arms and hands.

Painters were finishing up their work on some of the labs here, which made it more difficult for Sobh to pull out a new project that will allow students to use the Internet to control a robotic arm mounted on the base of a motorized wheelchair.

The robot will roam the Technology Building halls and be able

to open doors, Sobh said.

This is a far cry from the school and department Sobh came to almost a decade ago.

The university was recovering from a financial collapse in a city that was itself reeling from a massive economic shift that fostered a climate of unemployment and crime.

Economist Todd Martin, a UB graduate, said the university's return to prominence is good news for the city.

With an uncertain economy that's weathering rising energy prices and inflation, having a university with a strong engineering department could be important for improving Bridgeport's fortunes, according to Martin.

Because so much of Connecticut's success is tied to producing innovative products and services, "We're going to need smart engineers and smart scientists."

UB and other schools can provide those people, Martin said.

But the increased enrollment isn't enough to really help move the economy forward.

"In really successful cities, there's a strong interconnection between private to public and academic centers," Martin said.

Sobh and UB President Neil Albert Salonen said they recognize that and are working to reach out to businesses, Bridgeport and other cities in the state.

Internships and finding jobs for graduates are two of the ways, and Sobh said he's doing this.

A multi-page list of companies that hired UB graduates in the last seven years includes Bristol-Meyers Squibb, General Electric Co. and New York Medical Center, among others.

According to Sobh, this is a process that's snowballing. In the beginning, there were only a few

being hired but as those graduates have proven themselves, the companies come back to find more like them.

Primarily, the school of engineering is turning out computer-related engineers, but Sobh said the new faculty is energized and willing to push into other disciplines and create more programs.

There are more than 65 teachers in the department now, he said, and the school has added nanotechnology, biomedical and a variety of other disciplines.

As for improving connections to the community, UB announced earlier this month it will award \$2.4 million in scholarships for minority students to pursue engineering careers. Details on the program will be announced in December.

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Changes at UB a benefit to region

To say that the University of Bridgeport has had its problems over the years would be to significantly understate the case. But along with its South End neighborhood, the future is looking brighter for the oft-beleaguered institution.

With record enrollment in the school's engineering department, space that had fallen into disuse is once again alive with activity. The department now ranks among the top three in New England with about 1,250 students. And with computer technology and other high-tech curricula offering a chance at well-paying jobs upon graduation, the future is only brighter from here.

Like the city around it, the university is looking forward to a return to regional prominence in the years to come. A decade and a half ago, city and school both teetered on the verge of collapse. Today, while not yet thriving, both can see the light ahead.

And it's fitting that the engineering department is the source of most of the positive feeling. The future of the state's economy may well stem from developing innovative products and services, and local workers who can excel in those fields will benefit the whole region.

Though lower-skilled manufacturing jobs continue to flee the United States for distant shores, there are growing opportunities for highly skilled technical workers. A steady stream of qualified applicants, from UB and elsewhere, will be key for the state's economy into the future.

Taking a wider view, it's hard to imagine a revived Bridgeport without an equally vibrant university. As a center of learning and research, a college campus can help propel its hometown to unforeseen heights. The future of this partnership is starting to look up.

UB is a key cog

In my opinion, it is with great validity that the *Connecticut Post's* editorial of Nov. 25 notes the importance of a vibrant University of Bridgeport in the struggle of the city of Bridgeport to regain regional prominence.

Hopefully, the new mayor will abandon his past adversarial actions and words toward UB and enter into a relationship that will assist the growth of both the city and the University of Bridgeport.

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