WSU’S FIRST AND ONLY UNDERGRADUATE COMPOSITE ENGINEERING PROGRAM IN THE NATION

Every year, our state taxes go to pay for the many essential needs and services that make Minnesota one of the greatest states in the nation. While many of the benefits taxpayers receive in our state are obvious, most Minnesotans would be surprised to realize just how much state investments and expenditures truly impact our lives – both directly and indirectly.

In 1986, Governor Perpich visited Winona with a clear and distinct goal in mind to bring the benefits of our tax dollars home to Winona by encouraging important state investments in programming and infrastructure at Winona State University. Two years later, for the first time in the history of the state, the State of the State Address was delivered outside of St. Paul on the Winona State University campus by Governor Perpich. His address focused on the composite engineering industry in Winona and rural economic development.

Winona State has long had a strong relationship with Winona-area businesses and industries. In 1986, when Governor Perpich came to visit the WSU campus, he was impressed with the partnership between the University’s science department and Winona’s local composite industries including ICI Fiberite, TERTM, Polymer Composites, RTP Company, and We-no-nah Canoes.

Due to the good work WSU was doing for and with the local Winona economy, Perpich pledged to invest additional state tax dollars to create a Composite Engineering Program at the University that could further expand that relationship. I sponsored the legislation that Governor Perpich had included in his budget to secure an undergraduate Composite Engineering Program at Winona State University for the benefit of our community and state.

This program was a community effort that could not have been accomplished without the hard work and commitment of the people of Winona. While much of the program was to be funded through state tax dollars, one-third of the funding was required to come from private donations.

Support for the project was so great that with the help and leadership of ICI Fiberite founders Ben and Rudy Miller, and the generous contributions of many from across the Winona community, the project received above and beyond that one-third goal. Because of this community effort, the project met the qualifications to pursue necessary funding from the state.

In 1987, with the help of presentations to the House and Senate by Stan Prosen, the father of composite materials, state funding for the new program was passed and signed into law. Two decades later, that investment is still providing innovative research and development in the industry, strengthening the local economy, and attracting bright young learners to the University itself to continue this tradition of academic innovation and local economic...
partnership. It remains the only Undergraduate Composite Engineering Program in the United States – and 25% of its highly skilled graduates settle and work in the Winona area, leading many of the composite engineering companies that comprise our local economy.

Without the tax dollars that funded the Composite Engineering Program at WSU, the local and regional economy in the Winona area would not be what it is today. Because of the program, local composite engineering businesses have been able to sustain and improve their operations, expand the scope of their services and multiply into dozens of new composite related businesses. When these local businesses succeed, Winona succeeds.