

UW-Stout: Donated face shields help keep labs open, students safe

Posted on Thursday, Oct 29, 2020

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Menomonie, Wis. — From biology to art, technology to engineering and more, the lights are still on at the labs that help make University of Wisconsin-Stout the state's polytechnic leader.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to socially-distanced classrooms, hybrid classes and other campuswide safety precautions. Despite the challenges, many students still have been able to experience lab-based applied learning.

A donation has helped make it possible. Prent Corp. of Janesville donated 3,000 plastic face shields for lab use. The shields attach around the forehead and cover the entire face.

The plastic thermoforming company, with its sister company GOEX, began making face shields in the spring when the pandemic hit, donating tens of thousands of them to health care and other essential workers.

The late summer donation to UW-Stout was coordinated through Michelle Dingwall, Stout University Foundation Development Officer. The Prent CEO is Joe Pregont, a 1981 UW-Stout graduate.

"We absolutely would not be able to hold a meaningful laboratory experience

without those
face shields,” said Professor Jennifer Grant, noting that lab work sometimes requires
people
to be closer than six feet apart for short periods.

Human Biology, a general education class taught by Grant, has 24 students; lab
time in Jarvis Hall Science Wing is limited to 12 students.

“Students use the face shields often and appropriately to ask for help with the
microscopes
and other experiments,” Grant said. “The design is very clever. I personally find
them very
comfortable.”

Students make observations from histology slides and organ specimens. They also
perform
weekly experiments; recently they determined blood types from samples.

Students gear up Students like Erin Hongerholt also wear face masks under the
shields and, when working with chemicals, safety glasses as well. She wears
prescription glasses too, giving her four face coverings at times.

All of that can cause some fogging, she said, but she’s dealing with it.

“I like that we can still go to labs. It never hurts to be too careful,” said Hongerholt,
a first-
year student from St. Charles, Minn., who is majoring in entertainment design.

In the Jarvis Hall Tech Wing woods lab, Professor Jerry Johnson requires masks,
shields and safety glasses, the latter because of the heavy machinery being used
and because lab work sometimes requires close contact.

Like in Grant’s biology course, the woods lab is being used this semester by
students from a variety of majors.

“I get very warm and uncomfortable when wearing all of that on my face,” said
Ethan Foss, of Appleton, a senior in engineering technology.

Foss said Johnson is “doing a great job at keeping us at a safe distance” with half
the class in the lab at one time and the other half in the classroom.

“Professor Johnson also does his best at using Microsoft teams when he wants to talk to all 24 students. Also, we wipe down our area when we arrive with sanitizing spray and wipe it down before we leave,” Foss said.

Ann Parsons, interim associate dean of the College of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Management, said the “shields provide, it is thought, some additional protection. They are meant for short periods of time when six feet of distancing impacts student learning,” Parsons said.

UW-Stout is Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University, with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes.