



NEWS RELEASE

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Xcel Energy Cedar Falls Hydro project supports UW-Stout construction students' industry experiences

Collaboration encourages students to consider impacts of infrastructure on greater community

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Menomonie, Wis. – Donning hard hats and safety vests, [construction management](#) and risk control students from University of Wisconsin-Stout recently stood at the base of the Cedar Falls Hydroelectric plant and peered up at the 60-foot-tall dam that creates the 1,800-acre Tainter Lake, north of Menomonie.

Cedar Falls Hydro is one of 19 hydroelectric facilities in Wisconsin operated by [Xcel Energy](#), with a total generating capacity of about 272 megawatts of renewable and carbon-free electricity.

Xcel Energy is in the midst of a multi-year, \$50 million+ project designed to [improve the safety and increase spillway capacity of the Cedar Falls Hydro Dam](#). The phased upgrade first involves upgrades to the spillway, including tie-back anchors and mass concrete infill work. Future phases involve installing upstream cofferdams to install new spillway gates and constructing a downstream stilling basin to help reduce erosion of the riverbed at the dam.

Students in the Heavy Construction Methods & Equipment class, led by **Assistant Professor Janelle Skoyen Hestekin** and **Lecturer John Beckfield**, visited the site to see Xcel Energy's

project in operation and witness real-world applications surrounding the major community asset and capital project.

“Xcel Energy supports investment in educating the next generation of construction professionals by providing exposure to real-world construction projects and practical work experiences with UW-Stout students interested in the field of engineering, design and construction,” said Xcel Energy Project Manager **Anthony Witkowski**.

Prior to their visit, students worked together as a mock construction company to develop a broad-based construction plan for a mass concrete infill project, inspired by the Cedar Falls Hydro project. They presented their plan, which included materials, equipment, scheduling, staffing, permits, environmental quality, safety and job hazard analysis, and cost estimates to Witkowski and other Xcel Energy staff at the Cedar Falls site.

“It is clear the students put a significant amount of thought and preparation into their presentations in the areas of construction planning, construction safety, project scheduling and project cost estimating. I appreciated the clear written and verbal communication presented by the students,” Witkowski said.

Xcel Energy is an active member of [UW-Stout’s Construction Industry Advisory Committee](#), from which the collaboration and learning opportunity arose. Hestekin adapted her course structure to incorporate the project and guided students throughout the process.

The class project kicked off with a visit from Witkowski and **Dean Steines**, chief dam safety engineer – hydro operations, who introduced the project background and design goals to the students from the owner’s perspective. They also met with **Shane McFadden**, CEO of [Engineering & Construction Innovations, Inc.](#) (ECI), the project's prime contractor, and ECI project staff to compare their planned approach to how ECI is actively completing the work.

“The project exposed students to the heavy civil sector of construction work, where new talent is needed to grow the workforce. A sincere thank you to Xcel Energy for offering this opportunity to the students,” said Hestekin, who is looking forward to additional opportunities for students to collaborate at the Cedar Falls site and other nearby facilities.

Students from **Associate Professors Calvin Chen’s** Building Electrical and Control Systems class and **Assistant Professor Ashely Der’s** Construction Safety / Risk Control class also visited the site to see the operations of the power distribution network to the nearby cities, and safety management procedures, such as hot work – welding, cutting, soldering, and other tasks that produce heat, sparks or flame – and Lockout/Tagout (LOTO), a safety procedure used to protect workers by preventing the unexpected energization or startup of machinery and equipment.

Presenting a complete construction plan

The Cedar Falls dam, constructed in 1910, is one of a few remaining Ambursen dams – hollow dams with open sections between the buttresses on the downstream side of the dam. It is the hollow sections that will be filled with mass concrete, which was the focus of the students’ presentation.

Their broad-based construction plan and estimate for a mass concrete infill project, presented to Xcel Energy as the owner, included staff wages, material and machinery costs, transportation of material, equipment and personnel, and overhead costs.

The students' simulated work would consist of four separate concrete pours in each of the dam's 18 bays, with work beginning on Aug. 10 and completion on Nov. 12, taking into account rainfall, river flow and potential temperature-related concrete issues.

Their safety plan listed OSHA safety training requirements; the inspection of equipment, causeway, the local road and dam; and more.

Allie Hubbard, of Forest Lake, Minnesota, **Ben Larson**, of West Salem, and **Blake Bargender**, of Abbotsford, think the project was the most beneficial experience in the course, allowing them to visualize their classroom learning in a real-world setting.

"What stood out most was experiencing the project as if we were part of an actual company. I gained a better understanding of how important communication is across all team roles. I also learned the importance of maintaining strong relationships with subcontractors, since the construction industry is highly interconnected," said Hubbard, who is also majoring in [interior design](#).

Being able to visit the site and talk to the people actually working on the project gave Larson a new perspective and helped him see what the student group did well on their project and what they could have done better, Larson said.

Bargender plans to one day serve as a project manager for a commercial construction company. "This research project, presentation, and site visit significantly helped me prepare for my future career because it simulated a very realistic situation of estimating and planning in the role of a project manager," he said.

Students contributing to the greater community

Xcel Energy's long-standing partnership with UW-Stout continues to grow in meaningful ways, said Community Relations Manager **Tim Bartels**. "We are pleased to connect students directly with real-world infrastructure and community assets. We're especially proud that these collaborations support broader commitment to sustainability, giving students the opportunity to engage with projects that advance clean energy and the communities we serve," he said.

Hubbard thinks that with industry partners and collaborators, like Xcel, that encourage hands-on learning, "Stout students can continue to make lasting impacts on community and environmental projects by applying what we learn in class to real-world situations. Projects like the hydro facility show how we can contribute to the greater community. I am most interested in the opportunity to contribute to how our world is built in the future and to make a lasting impact on the places people use every day," she said.

Larson and Bargender agreed and added that students can also make an impact on community or environmental projects by getting involved with student organizations, like the [Student Construction Association](#), [Women in Construction](#), and [Sigma Lambda Chi](#), and by volunteering or joining a construction competition team to gain real experience.

"The more you put in, the more you get out of it," Larson said. "What I like most about my construction management major is how many opportunities it opens up. In our program, we are exposed to a little bit of everything. So, when we graduate, there are so many directions within the industry. I like that flexibility and the fact that the possibilities are pretty much endless."

As a construction management and interior design double major, Hubbard enjoys being a part of the entire process “from the very beginning, meeting with clients, understanding their needs and wants, and then bringing their vision to life. It’s especially rewarding to guide clients through the process and ultimately hand over the keys to a finished structure they can be excited about,” she said.

Xcel Energy provides the energy that powers millions of homes and businesses across eight Western and Midwestern states. Its spillway modernization project was approved by the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin in 2021, with the multi-year project beginning in 2022. The project is part of Xcel Energy’s investment in a cleaner electric system, as it drives toward 100% carbon-free electricity by 2050.

Graduates from UW-Stout’s B.S. construction management program reported a 100% employment rate within six months of graduation and an average starting salary of \$70,000, according to the latest university [First Destination Report](#).

UW-Stout’s [School of Management](#) offers 20 undergraduate and graduate degrees and certificates that build students' leadership skills in operations and management, business, hospitality and technology innovation, and military science fields.

UW-Stout, a member of the [Universities of Wisconsin](#), is [Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University](#), with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes. Learn more via the [FOCUS2030](#) strategic plan.

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Photos

UW-Stout construction management and risk control students visit Xcel Energy’s Cedar Falls Hydroelectric plant. Photo submitted by Janelle Skoyen Hestekin.

Students present their broad-based construction plan for a mass concrete infill project to Xcel Energy staff. Photo submitted by Janelle Skoyen Hestekin.

Students at the base of the Cedar Falls Hydro Dam. Photo submitted by Janelle Skoyen Hestekin.

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