

Area high school students get lessons in engineering

By : Erin Owens

A group of high school girls got to experience life at Binghamton University firsthand, and may now be seeing college and Binghamton in their futures.

Sixteen high school girls from Spencer-Van Etten High School, all members of a girls' science club, visited Binghamton on Wednesday, March 25, and learned about the engineering program. The girls took a tour of the campus, spoke with administrators, attended an engineering class and spent time with members of the Society of Women Engineers during lunch and an engineering activity.

"We're here to inspire these girls to want to continue their education in the sciences," said senior Caitlyn Chiofolo, president of the Society of Women Engineers, a student group for women.

The trip was an educational outreach event of the Cornell Nanobiotechnology Center and Binghamton University's Small Scale Systems Integration and Packaging Center, in association with Binghamton University's Section of the Society of Women Engineers, and was funded by the National Science Foundation.

For Patricia Parker, a ninth-grader from Van Etten, the visit gave her a better understanding of what engineering really is. "Today opened my eyes to the engineering field and what it has to offer," she said.

This is exactly what Mary Beth Curtin, associate director for the Small Scale Systems Integration and Packaging Center, wanted the girls to get out of the event.

"You need to engage students early so they can see science as an exciting career," she said.

The Spencer-Van Etten students come from a rural, high-poverty area, where there are not many opportunities for young people, and where college does not seem like much of an option, said Jennifer Weil, adviser for the girls' science club and director of education for the Cornell Nanobiotechnology Center.

Weil said many of the girls had never even been to a college campus. "This trip allows them to see college life as something that is attainable," Weil said. "They are able to leave this and say, 'I could do that too.'"

Daniela Escobar, a 12th-grade foreign exchange student from Colombia, isn't considering studying engineering. But after her visit to campus, she has decided that she might want to return.

"I'm already enrolled in a college at home that has a study abroad program at Binghamton," she said. "Now that I see the campus and everything, it is a definite possibility for me."

Weil said the low-cost, short distance from home and well-known engineering program make Binghamton a great fit for the Spencer-Van Etten students. "I was leaning toward another school," Estella Swartout said, "but then I came here and I really like it." The 11th grader from Van Etten said she especially enjoyed seeing the engineering lab: "I could really see myself doing that."

Sharon Fellows, assistant director of the engineering design division and faculty adviser for the Society of Women Engineers, said that overall, she would like to see the visit spark someone's interest in engineering and inspire her to apply to Binghamton.

"We want to expose the girls to other young women," she said, "to see what they've done and achieved, and realize that they can do it too."