

THE CAPITAL OF CONNECTORS

Local connector firm donates \$500,000 to Penn State Harrisburg engineering program

By Daniel Walmer
Press And Journal Staff

One student with cerebral palsy created a hand-operated manual clutch so he could drive without using his legs. Others created an icing sensor and warning system for aircraft, a system that translates vocal speech to Braille, and an electric-powered motorcycle.

These are examples of the capstone projects each Penn State Harrisburg engineering student must complete before graduation, developed by seemingly limitless imaginations but only limited funds – until now.

TE Connectivity, a tech products company that specializes in electrical conductors and has a location on Fulling Mill Road in Lower Swatara Township, has donated \$500,000 to Penn State Harrisburg to create the TE Connectivity Capstone Design Endowment and Lecture Series in Connector Design.

The gift, which was presented to Penn State Harrisburg during a ceremony on Thursday, Aug. 8, will help students complete projects they previously would not otherwise have had the funds to undertake, said Omid Ansary, senior associate dean for academic affairs and former director of Penn State Harrisburg's School of Science, Engineering, and Technology.

"They can tackle much larger projects," Ansary said. "This is going to really help them financially to do things they couldn't do before."

Not that the tech boom north of Middletown needs much encouragement. In fact, according to Ansary, the area is world-famous as the "capital of connectors," the small but critical units found in everything from cell phones to alarm clocks.



Photo by Daniel Walmer

Tom Lynch, left, CEO of TE Connectivity, accepts the gift of a crystal Pennsylvania state Capitol replica from Penn State Harrisburg Chancellor Mukund Kulkarni. The gift was given as a token of appreciation for a \$500,000 donation from TE Connectivity on Thursday, Aug. 8.

Ever since AMP Connectors, later known as Tyco International and now TE Connectivity, first built its Middletown-area location, connectivity companies have swarmed to the area, said David Rupnik, TE Connectivity's CTO and vice president, Product Management Appliances Business Unit.

"We think the engineering firms in the area are the main force behind the economic development of the region," Ansary said. "We are really kind of interconnected with them in doing collaborations at various levels."

Penn State Harrisburg has grown up with the region's exploding connectors industry, creating what Ansary says is a nationally-recognized engineering school. And that's where the capstone project comes in: Professors and students believe the project is essential to the school's role in educating the region's next generation of engineers.

"The capstone project was for me, personally, where I learned the most academi-

cally and practically," said Mark Brubaker, an engineer for TE Connectivity and a former Penn State Harrisburg student. The work he does now, he said, is "fundamentally" the same as the capstone project, and he frequently relies on the problem-solving and teamwork skills and strong work ethic the project helped to foster.

"A lot is gained through the capstone project," he said.

Ansary agreed.

"This is where academics and real-life merge," he said. "No matter what you teach in the classroom, it's still academic. It's not real life."

Now that the school's arrangement with TE Connectivity has been formalized for the long-term, the company can create a "more holistic approach" to the projects, allowing successive students to work on the same long-term projects and projects that complement one another, said Rupnik.

And the student engineers, still young and dar-

ing enough to pursue their dreams and personal ideas, help TE Connectivity by providing a different perspective, Ansary said.

"Students are not afraid to make mistakes, so that brings innovation," he said.

The program also provides TE Connectivity with access to the latest ideas coming from the college level, Rupnik said.

More than 80 people crowded into Penn State Harrisburg Library's Morrison Gallery for the presentation of the gift, and officials from both the university and the business praised what Penn State Harrisburg Chancellor Mukund Kulkarni called a "long and distinguished relationship" between the two organizations.

TE Connectivity CEO Tom Lynch noted that 400 Penn State Harrisburg graduates have become TE employees.

"It's been a tremendous, long-term partnership," Lynch said. "I think this is just taking our partnership to another level."