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# Bridge-building competition teaches local high school students the fundamentals of engineering

*By Jean Stevens*

With homemade balsam wood bridges in hand, hundreds of local students came to Syracuse University this weekend to test their engineering skills.

The L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science, the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry and Syracuse City School District sponsored the "Build 'Em and Bust 'Em Bridge Building Contest" on Saturday in Link and Huntington Beard Crouse Halls. The contest aimed to give local students of all ages the opportunity to learn about basic engineering concepts by building small bridge models, said organizer Peter Plumley, assistant dean for outreach in Engineering and Computer Science.

Professors used a hydraulic cylinder and load cell to measure the stress applied on the bridges, and the results were projected in graph form onto a screen so audience members could see them, Plumley said.

Neighbors Erik Eibert, a senior at Skaneateles High School, and Billy Howley, a senior at Bishop Ludden High School in Syracuse, were the first high school team to have their bridge tested.

"We're still a little bit confused if it actually broke. It supposedly disconnected in its joints, and that's when they stopped it," Howley said.

This year's turnout was the greatest the event has ever had, said Chris Rhinehart, director of fiscal operations for Engineering and Computer Science. The contest had 16 bridges from elementary school teams, 62 bridges from middle school teams and 20 bridges from high school teams. Each team had one to six members.

"SU supplied the supplies for the bridges, the students built their own bridges, and they bring them here to be broken, and see how much stress the bridges can withstand," Rhinehart said.

All bridges were made from balsam wood sticks delivered to all teams two weeks before the competition. Each bridge needed to fit in a certain weight range, and no additional materials could be used, Howley said.

The award ceremony was held at noon in Gifford Auditorium. The winner from each division received a plaque, and the first, second and third place winners won ribbons, Rhinehart said.

Students also participated in a "Write-It, Do-It" contest, which "tests students' ability to write about a structure, and then another set of students reads it and figures it out," said Plumley. The group that recreated the original most accurately won an award.

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Mark Firger, a senior civil engineering major, volunteered for the event.

"They said they need people, the more the better. I got nothing better to do at 8:30 in the morning, except sleep," Firger said.

Students could attend tours of the Engineering and Computer Science facilities throughout the day while waiting for their bridges to be tested. At 1:30 p.m., students walked to the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry for a tour of the campus.

"After the kids get their bridges broken, we're going to show them around the labs, break some concrete, maybe even some steel," Firger said.

Howley and Eibert estimated they spent 12 to 15 hours on their bridge, and overall were happy with their model and the day.

"I thought it was really interesting looking at bridge design. If we could do it again we would have tested more designs," Howley said.

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