A NEW CLASS OF ENGINEERS

DISCONTINUED IN SASKATCHEWAN IN THE LATE '70S, THE BACHELOR OF MINING ENGINEERING DEGREE IS ON ITS WAY BACK.

As with virtually every industry in Saskatchewan today, finding highly qualified people is one of mining's ongoing challenges. To help answer that challenge, the industry is doing more than searching for them; it's helping to create them. That's what Saskatchewan's International Minerals Innovation Institute (IMII) is doing to help meet the industry-wide demand for people, and especially, engineers with specialized skills in mining.

The demand continues to grow as mining companies launch new initiatives such as mine expansions. Simultaneously, an increasing number of long-term employees are retiring. Furthermore, even first-year engineering students are aggressively wooed by other sectors, notably oil and gas in Alberta.

One of the best ways to get young students thinking of mining as a career option is to be sure it's an option in their educational programs. The SMA had been working with government and post-secondary system to develop more mining-related training since 2008 when the SMA's first Labour Market Study identified that over 18,000 new workers would be required in the next decade.

Formed in 2012, IMII is a co-funding partnership of industry, government, in cooperation with the post-secondary educational institutions in Saskatchewan.

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University of Saskatchewan, Engineering Building, Speaking: The Honourable Gord Wyant, Minister of Justice.

IMII focuses on the two key generators of advancement in the minerals industry: E&T (education and training) and R&D (research and development). These are areas where the six mining companies who are currently members and either mining or doing pre-development work are cooperating for everyone's benefit. Pam Schwann, Executive Director, of the SMA was pleased that the E&T pillar addressed the SMA's advocacy efforts for increasing post-secondary, mining-related training. For education and training, their input through an IMII E&T Advisory Panel determines the needs of the industry.

IMII then works with the government and institutions to see what can be done.

"IMII brings all these institutions and organizations to the table, to see where efficiencies can be gained, and where we can collaborate to develop programs rather than working in isolation and duplicating efforts," says Rodney Orr, IMII's original executive director. He adds that IMII is not involved in designing programs – only in identifying the needs and helping to foster solutions.

A prime example is the $1.67 million IMII has invested over the next three years to introduce mining option courses at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Engineering. "Some of the courses already existed," Schwann points out. "But now you will have five to seven courses that are tailor-made to fit with chemical, geological and mechanical engineering." Starting in 2015 or 2016 (depending on the stream they're in at the College), students can graduate with, for example, a B.Eng. in Chemical Engineering with an option in Mining. That's the first milestone in the long-range plans.

The U of S once offered a Bachelor of Mining Engineering degree, but discontinued the program in the 1970s due to low demand. Now the demand is greater than ever before. "Regardless of what stage you're at in mining, whether it's initial planning, exploration or well-established operations, you need engineers," says Schwann. With continued emphasis on mining at the College of Engineering, Schwann predicts that by 2019 we'll have this century's first U of S graduate with a Bachelor of Mining Engineering degree.

There will be no shortage of job offers. ∎