

ATTENTION FEATURE AND BUSINESS EDITORS

MEDIA RELEASE

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SIAST opens doors to non-traditional careers

Women seize opportunity to give engineering technology a test run

March 1, 2012 – Young women in search of a role model on International Women’s Day next week need look no further than *The Simpsons*. Lisa Simpson, the wide-eyed, moralistic middle child from the animated TV series, is plucky, articulate and unapologetic about her grasp of an impressive range of subjects -- including science and math.

Too bad more girls today don’t have Lisa’s confidence in their math and science abilities. There are plenty of rewarding, well-paying careers in the “STEM” professions (science, technology, engineering and math), but the fact is that many young women don’t seriously consider them. According to Statistics Canada, women accounted for only 22.3 percent of the workforce in the fields of natural sciences, engineering and mathematics in 2009.

It took Jocelyn Sagal 10 years to channel her mathematical skills into the right career. At 28, Sagal is a key account coordinator with Magna Electric Corporation in Regina, where she develops quotes and recommends maintenance schedules for clients’ electrical equipment. Before joining Magna Electric, Sagal had worked in the hospitality sector for more than a decade. But when this extreme-cycling enthusiast became frustrated with the instability and lacklustre pay of her role, she had to do some soul-searching.

“I was always good at math, and I was looking for a challenge,” she says. She also recalled a high school field trip to SIAST, where she had an opportunity to wire some lights and loved the hands-on experience. So at 25, she enrolled in SIAST’s Electrical Engineering Technology program, graduating in 2011 with marks above 90 percent.

The program is just one of 12 Engineering Technology diploma programs SIAST offers that can lead to satisfying careers with excellent salaries in areas such as computer-aided drafting, surveying, instrumentation, mining and geomatics. And while women enrol directly in and graduate from all of the programs, some choose to give engineering technology a “test drive” before signing up.

They can do so by taking SIAST’s “Women in Technology Exploratory Course,” a 12-session evening program organized by Women in Trades & Technology (WITT), a SIAST initiative that encourages girls and women to consider work opportunities in areas traditionally dominated by men. Participants in the course “can try out eight of the engineering technologies SIAST offers, all of which are in high demand in the labour market,” says Anna Kwasnica, WITT coordinator at SIAST. In the Geomatics Engineering Technology session, for instance, women can experiment with a precision GPS to create a topographic map used in building or road design.

Participants also gain an insider’s look at each technology stream from women working in each field. One evening the instructor could be a civil engineering technologist, for example; another evening, she could be a water resources engineering technologist.

Exposure to female role models is “one of the most effective ways” to attract women to typically male-dominated careers, says Crystal Stadnyk, SIAST’s WITT provincial facilitator. With a background in computer systems technology, Stadnyk herself is a role model. In May, she’ll be leading one-day mother-and-daughter workshops at SIAST that get girls in grades 5, 6 and 7 playing with PicoCricket computers to add sounds, lights and movement to their craft creations. “It’s a really fun, non-threatening way to introduce technical concepts,” says Stadnyk, “and it increases girls’ confidence in their abilities.”

It’s no coincidence that the workshops are geared to tween girls. Young people’s interest in science drops by 20 percentage points between ages 12/13 and 17/18, according to the Canadian Youth Science Monitor, a national survey conducted in 2010 by Ipsos Reid for the Canada Foundation for Innovation.

Not surprisingly, if girls are going to be inspired by science and math and eventually land meaningful careers in these fields, the spark must be ignited early—right around Lisa Simpson’s age.

For more information about SIAST’s Women in Technology Exploratory Course, the Mother and Daughter PicoCricket Workshop, or SIAST Engineering Technology programs, go to www.goSIAST.com, or call 1-866-goSIAST (467-4278).

SIAST is Saskatchewan’s primary public institution for post-secondary technical education and skills training, recognized nationally and internationally for its expertise and innovation. SIAST serves 26,000 distinct students with programs and courses that touch every sector of the economy. SIAST operates campuses in Moose Jaw, Prince

Albert, Regina and Saskatoon, and provides a number of courses and programs through distance education.

– 30 –

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