SUNY New Paltz joins a multi-state race in a solar-powered car

BY THERESA KEEGAN

Things are not just heating up, but they’re also moving along at a fast clip in the innovative world of solar-powered cars. And SUNY New Paltz is leading the way.

“We’re in the middle of building a brand new car,” says faculty advisor Michael Otis. “It’s the same body design, but with a new body and new frame. We’re just doing it a little bit smarter this time.”

And the team hopes those smarter steps will push their entry higher in the ranking of the prestigious American Solar Challenge and the Formula Sun Grand Prix – especially since the later race, which brings international competitors to the track, will be held right in the Hudson Valley this summer.

And so, in a car consuming the same amount of power it takes to run a hair dryer, SUNY students will be turning laps on a racetrack in Monticello for a few days starting July 6. Then on July 14 they’ll begin trying for no breakdown.”

The school has been developing solar cars since 2008, and started competing in 2009. The effort, which costs about $250,000, is truly a community collaboration. The Solar Energy Consortium is a key helper in both finances, as well as technical support. And then local manufacturers, including FALA Technologies, have helped make parts for the car. BOCES students have helped with welding, while students from both Ulster and Dutchess community colleges have been involved and local high schools have helped with designs.

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The school has been developing solar cars since 2008, and started competing in far-reaching impacts.

“I had no idea,” said Otis. “I’m so glad it’s opened up doors that I never even anticipated being opened.”

Besides the camaraderie that’s developed while racing against other college teams from throughout the world, Otis believes the students also benefit from multi-disciplinary exposure. The team consists of about 30 students, although less than half are continually, actively involved. But they’ve all learned what’s involved with putting together a project as business students get involved to raise money and art students help with the design.

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“Without all the support, we probably wouldn’t have a car,” says Otis.

Building the solar car initially allowed Otis, who is with the school’s electrical and computer engineering departments, to also bring his love of competitive racing to the school. But the program has resulted in far-reaching impacts.

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“Of course, it’s good for the engineering students in electric and computer, because it also involves a lot of mechanical engineering. It makes them a much more rounded, versatile person in both real life and the industry,“ he said. “It’s a skill our students should have and I’m glad we can offer it.”