Electrical engineering student Daryl Wescan, left, measures EMG signals in the bicep of Jensen Sears, 17.

Engineering students strut stuff for youths

By Clayton Norlen Desert News

For some the face of invention can be seen in the mad experiments of Dr. Frankenstein, others find it hidden in modern technology like microwaves and cell phones. Yet for engineering students at the University of Utah, invention echoes along the glass walls at the Warnock Engineering Building where they study and learn to take inventions from imagination to reality.

U. students recently exhibited and demonstrated budding innovations born in the engineering department as part of Meet an Inventor Day. Christopher Benson, a graduate student in electrical engineering and organizer for the event, said that the event was meant to inspire students studying in K-12 to pursue an education in math and engineering.

A crowd of more than 100 parents and students shuffled between classrooms to witness different experiments being explored by students and professors at the U. One demonstrated how an artificial material could be used as a substitute for real blood's oxygen-carrying capabilities in the human body, another how the minute voltage in a bicep muscle could be used to control a piece of equipment like a prosthetic limb.

"I've always been interested in taking things apart and understanding how they work," Benson said. "And for me electrical engineering was what I thought would be the best route to approach alternative sources of energy and energy efficiency, which is something I am passionate about."

College-bound high school students were able to talk with those studying in fields they're considering and hear what inspired them to pursue a degree in engineering. Marshall Ruiz, a freshman at West High School, became interested in studying mechanical engineering after winning a $1,000 scholarship last year for his work with bottle rockets. Ruiz said he appreciated the passion students conveyed as they presented their topics because it seemed they were having fun with their education.

"College is actually starting to look more easy — I mean, besides the expenses," Ruiz said. "It looks like it will be a lot more than partying, but it's worth it in the end."

The event was possible because of a $2 million grant from the National Science Foundation the U. received in 2007. The grant is aimed at encouraging high school and community college students to seek a degree in engineering. For more information on engineering at U., visit www.ece.utah.edu/. Youths who are interested in engineering or science but aren't going to college soon can visit www.tryengineering.org or www.engineeryourlife.org.

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