

Report on the Zone 9 and 11 Joint Zone Meeting

Hosted by the University of Wisconsin – River Falls SPS Chapter
April 11-12, 2008

During the second weekend of April, the UW River Falls chapter of the Society of Physics Students had the privilege of hosting a Zone Meeting. We invited schools from both Zone 9 and Zone 11, as we are only 20 miles from the border between zones. Schools from as far as northern Illinois attended, despite the unseasonably cold and snowy weather. Two schools cancelled due to travel concerns, Bemidji State University was in blizzard conditions! However, a total of six schools were represented, with a total attendance of nearly 60 people on Friday evening and nearly 40 on Saturday. The Zone meeting was a complete success despite the weather.

The meeting began on Friday night with a friendly competition to build the tallest structure using only uncooked spaghetti and mini-marshmallows. This gave us a chance to get to know folks from other schools, and allowed for a range of arrival times. The UW Platteville crew jumped out to an impressive early lead with a tall narrow tower, shown at the right, but it collapsed under its own weight. One of the teams from UW River Falls won with a monumental pyramid, shown at two stages in construction below.





Our keynote speaker from the Johnson Space Center, Laurie Carrillo, also enjoyed working with some UWRP students on a structure. After making a good mess and having a great time, we adjourned to a banquet.

After dinner we opened the actual meeting. SPS President and UWRP advisor Earl Blodgett explained the Future Faces of Physics theme. As part of that, two UWRP physics students coached everyone in how to use sign language to say “Society of Physics Students”. The photo on the left shows everyone working on “Society”. One of the Future Faces of Physics wasn’t quite old enough to learn the sign language.



We then welcomed our keynote speaker. Laurie’s presentation focused on an exciting new field of space propulsion which she is helping to develop. The VASIMR project makes use of the properties of plasma to drive spacecraft. In addition, Laurie inspired students with her own personal story of overcoming the circumstances of growing up in a poor Latino family in southern Texas, finally going on to become an engineer with NASA. We were delighted that she was able to stay for the entire meeting, and even hang out with physics students after the meeting. She doesn’t get to experience snow very often, so that was enjoyable for her.



Saturday morning we reconvened for breakfast, followed by talks on student research, outreach activities and demonstrations. A total of eight talks were presented, since two presenters were unable to attend because of the weather. Here are some examples of each of the three categories. Lee Massey (UW River Falls) presented his work on alternative fuels for transportation, supported by the APS Forum on Physics and Society. 2007 SPS intern Justin Reeder (UW Platteville) told us about his experience last summer putting together and testing the SOCK kits. Matt Blodgett (UW River Falls) showed the latest improvements in the Gauss Gun demonstration, launching a small iron slug into a colorful safety net (okay, it's an old bed sheet).



We also had a one-hour workshop right before lunch. NASA Informal Educator Marguerite Blodgett shared a number of tips and examples of how to adapt science content ideas for a wide range of ages, which is a challenge we all face when doing outreach activities. We went out in the hallway and paced off a scale solar system, including ‘rings’ around Saturn. A very popular activity was making and launching paper ‘rockets’ using soda straws as the launch tower.



We also modeled the difference between observing planets from Earth with telescopes versus up close in a planetary fly-by.



Finally the meeting wrapped up outside with the ever popular UWRF trebuchet, where we launched cantaloupes (or muskmelons, depending on where you grew up) far across the campus lawns. The SPS crew from UW Platteville took some short videos and posted them on YouTube, search for “River Falls Trebuchet” and all three videos come up.