First semester in the books for NECA at S.D. State

By JAMES PALEN, The Daily Transcript
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Five months ago, San Diego State University student Denise Cortez was asked to take on a new task.

She took the opportunity presented, and since then, has stood as the first president of the recently established SDSU chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association.

With its establishment, San Diego State became the 22nd university in the nation to associate itself with NECA, joining other well-known schools like Oregon State University, Penn State and Texas A&M.

Available only to schools that offer a curriculum for the electrical construction industry, a NECA student chapter at SDSU wouldn’t have even been a possibility some time ago.

But with the addition of the school’s Construction Engineering & Management Program a few years back, NECA apparently thought it was about time to invite San Diego students to the ranks.

Cortez recalled when NECA came by to offer the program.

“They figured that having a chapter here at San Diego State would be really beneficial, and also spark some more interest in the electrical construction industry,” Cortez said.

Essentially, the student chapter is a lot like its professional counterpart, just smaller.

To-dos include weekly meetings, updates on the industry and setting up opportunities to meet and work in various ways with professionals in the electrical field, which can sometimes mean guest speakers on campus or site visits out in the field.

The chapter has already proven fruitful for Cortez. One such guest speaker brought her more than just information; it brought her a job.

After finding out that Baker Electric would be on campus discussing photovoltaics, Cortez rounded up her members to attend the lecture.

It set up her first opportunity, and now she’ll be busy in the summer working with Baker, doing everything from financing to estimating and working with building information management systems.

“They’re going to be rotating me around, so I’ll be getting to see different aspects,” Cortez said.

Karen Prescott, NECA San Diego’s director of local government relations and economic development, is doubling as SDSU’s student chapter liaison.

In working with Cortez and the university, Prescott has been able to see how the interconnectivity at the collegiate level can impact more than just a few individuals.

“I have had the opportunity to meet some really bright minds who want to contribute to this industry,” Prescott said by e-mail.

“Our industry can only benefit from it.”

The contract NECA has with San Diego State guarantees internships for chapter members working on the Green Energy Challenge, an annual competition among the student chapters.

Right now, the entire chapter is working on the challenge, as it has only six members. But Cortez hopes to expand membership to at least 30 by next fall.

Much of the chapter’s attention in its inaugural semester has gone toward the competition, which this year calls for chapters to conduct a realistic energy audit of a dormitory at their university. The focus is on lighting systems, opportunities for energy efficiency and campus energy awareness.

Based on their energy audit findings, the teams then submit a preliminary design of a retrofit that could include alternative energy sources. Each team is also required to prepare a presentation in which their efforts are reported from the perspective of a design-build contractor.

The SDSU team, dubbed “Aztec Energy,” is working on University Towers, a nine-story high-rise dorm on campus.

Just recently, the team held a student awareness outreach in which students were presented with current issues in sustainability, and asked questions about personal electricity use and other lifestyle questions intended to help steer the final designs for the dorm.

Working with industry professionals through the chapter has given the members a chance to see realistic possibilities for the challenge and helped focus the team’s efforts.

“They’ve been mentoring us in what to look for and what type of methods we should use to improve on saving energy for the building,” Cortez said.

The ongoing competition prevented Cortez from divulging any details about what will make the list of plans for University Towers, but she said the plan would definitely green things up a bit on Montezuma Mesa.
“It was built around 1975,” Cortez said, “and it hasn’t had a lot of renovations. Any changes about it would automatically save the school a lot of money. It’s little changes that make a huge difference.”

Final plans are expected by the end of May. While there is no guarantee that the plans will actually be picked up by a contractor or even approved by the university for construction, the experience with NECA and the Green Building Challenge is something Cortez wouldn’t give up.

“These past three months, I’ve learned so much about financing a project and getting more involved with the industry,” she said. “We’re actually applying what we learn in school into something that’s actually real.”