

Railroad group rolls

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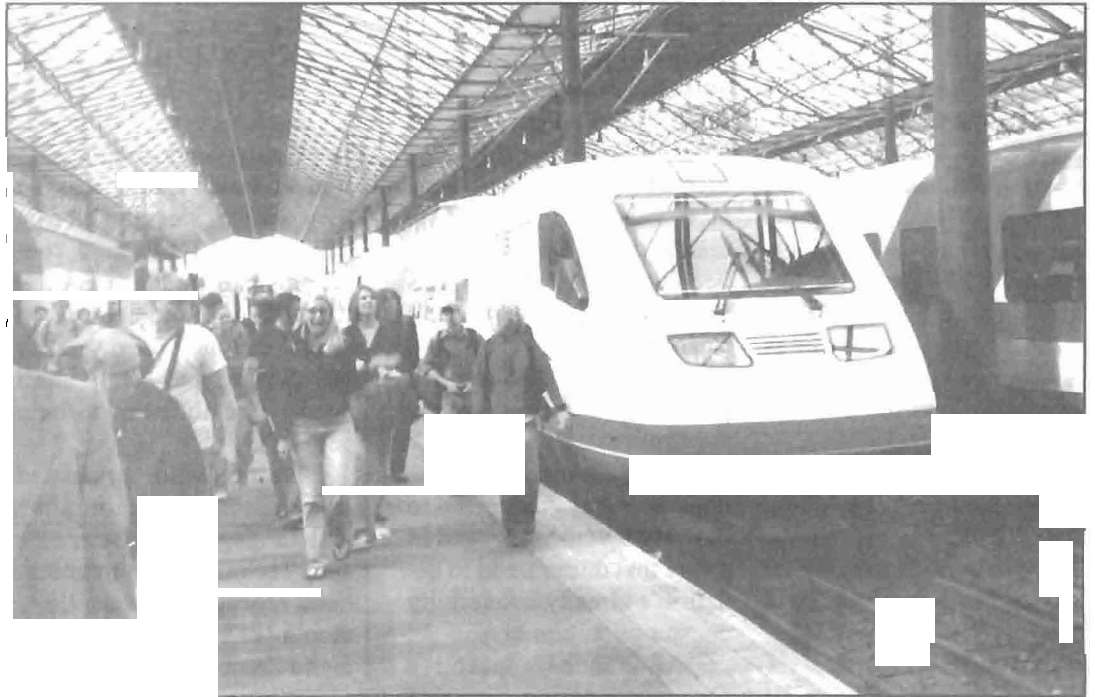
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With gas prices rocketing, people are looking once again to trains for a more cost-efficient means of transporting goods. Here at MTU, a professor and a Ph.D student have come together to create a program that allows students interested in this field to be trained and learn first-hand about railway systems.

Dr. Bill Sproule and Ph.D student Pasi Lautala share a common interest: railroads and trains. Lautala, once just a grad student visiting from Finland, eventually collaborated several years later with Sproule, his advisor back in the day, and they came up with the "Railroad Engineering Study Program to Finland" in 2004. 16 students took six credits, three on railroad engineering and three on the Finnish language and culture. They spent the first week in Houghton, followed by a field trip to Chicago and then traveled to Finland for the remaining three weeks. In 2005, the program had 13 students and this year there will be 10. Lautala felt the biggest detractor from the program, with over 40 people showing interest this year, was the cost.

Beside the cost of the credits, there is the airfare and living expenses within Finland, not to mention the loss of money from a possible co-op during that time.

However, many railroad companies have been deeply interested in the program and have started recruiting at MTU as a result. Currently most railroad companies hire students and then spend six to nine months training the individuals. Obviously, if students al-



ready have some background in the field, they are immediately much more valuable to these companies. "Before taking the job they can learn at a university," Lautala explained, adding that there are no programs of this type anywhere else in the United States. "Very few universities teach anything about railroads." The University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana has several classes specializing in railway design, as does the University of Kentucky, but they don't involve field trips or visiting foreign countries. Lautala commented that railroad companies in the United States are stricter in what visiting students can see as far as operations and equipment than any companies in Finland.

"It's a very active industry right now; operations and profits have gone up because it's more economical to ship by rail," Lautala said.

Companies like CSX have talked with Lautala and Sproule and even offered \$400 - \$500 scholarships this year for students interested in



Photo Courtesy of Pasi Lautala

Members of the unique MTU railroad engineering study program on a visit to the railways of Finland.

working in the field. With the program continually gaining attention, more funding should follow, making it more affordable for students to participate. "You can take the program even if you are not a civil engineer... what I'm really trying to promote is to make it multi-disciplinary," Lautala explained. A railroad club has even been started at MTU called "Railroad Engineering and Activities Club" that promotes involvement in the railroad industry. They hosted

a Railroad Night in February with big railroad companies like CSX, UPRR and BNSF showing up.

"This is a living project that evolves as we move along" said Lautala. For students interested, Lautala can be contacted at ptlautal@mtu.edu or in his office @ 308 Dillman, where he has pamphlets giving a more in-depth description of the trip and program. The REAC information can be found at <http://www.sos.mtu.edu/react/>.