2023 AGP Study Trip to Germany

Mike Brooks, AGP Vice-Chair

Olympic medal winners, mRNA lipids, apprenticeships, Riesling, a biotech & life science hub, an incubator pitch competition, and the largest industrial complex we've ever seen. The AGP Study Trip once again provided an eye-opening and enriching experience, with insightful conversations about German culture, education, and industry.

Our trip started in Frankfurt, with a two-hour walking tour of the medieval Altstadt (old town), where we saw the Frankfurt Cathedral (former election and coronation church of the Holy Roman Empire), Römerberg (heart of the Altstadt, home to Christmas Market, and site of a book burning in 1933), and explored the "New Old Town" – an urban redevelopment project that transformed dull administrative concrete buildings to their pre-war renaissance-era beauty. Not far from the hotel, we visited the Jewish Holocaust Remembrance Wall, which surrounds a medieval cemetery; the wall includes 11,908 blocks each with a name for all the known Frankfurt victims of the National Socialists.

We ended our tour with an early dinner at Paulaner am Dom, where the group enjoyed traditional Bavarian dishes; the Octoberfest Special was a popular request: ½ grilled pork knuckle, breaded pork escalope, Bavarian meat loaf and white sausage with sauerkraut, potato dumplings and fried potatoes, beer gravy and two kinds of mustard.

On Monday we visited the Deutscher Olympischer Sportsbund (DOSB)/ German Olympic Sports Confederation, where we learned about the incredible time and expense involved in submitting a bid to host the Olympics, the structure and importance of organized sports in Germany (from an Olympic medalist!) and received some direct & constructive feedback on Germany's experience at the World Games in Birmingham.

Julian Schäfer from the Rheinland-Pfalz Ministry of Economy Affairs joined us for lunch and travelled with us to the Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) in Mainz. With around 30,000 students from 120 countries, JGU is one of the largest and most diverse universities in Germany; their administration is actively working to position Mainz as the premier location in Germany for Biotech and Life Sciences. Our study group had a robust conversation about international exchange programs, the intersection of academic research with industry needs, and apprenticeships. We concluded our visit with a tour of their impressive facilities and laboratory space. Many in the group left with a new-found appreciation for the research that can come from a simple grocery store mushroom.

On Tuesday morning we arrived the headquarters of BASF in Ludwigshafen. "This is the largest industrial facility I've ever been to, hands down." When Bob Smith, the state's lead economic developer is impressed, you know you're in for a unique experience. The facility, which runs along the Rhine River, is roughly equal to the distance between New York's Central Park and the southern tip of Manhattan. Ludwigshafen is the world's biggest interconnected BASF location, where some 350 chemical production facilities are closely interlocked across ten square kilometers (2,500 acres) and, in many respects, are both suppliers to and recipient of products from one another. Chemical production requires a significant amount of power; in fact, the demand is more than 6 terawatt hours (TWh) per year, a full one percent of all the power consumption in Germany. A significant part of our discussion was about Germany's quest for efficient and sustainable energy sources, and the challenges that core industries will face as the country weens itself from nuclear and Russian sources. Beyond energy, we discussed BASF's substantial investment in Alabama, apprenticeship & student exchange programs, and their challenges in recruiting and hiring skilled workers and scientists.

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While we could have stayed at BASF all day, our friends at the Business + Innovation Center (BIC) Kaiserslautern GmbH were anxiously awaiting our arrival. Five tenants of the BIC pitched their businesses and business ideas to our group, and then fielded questions about their product/service, the market potential, and the different sources of funding available to them. One of them, Ziggurat AI, is an AI-powered tool for planning of sustainable urban water and drainage systems; they had done their research, and were familiar with the wastewater challenges in Alabama's Black Belt.

We concluded the day at the Von Winning Winery, founded in 1849, in the town of Deidesheim in the Pfalz region of western Germany. It is a founding member of the VDP (the Verband Deutscher Prädikats – an association of Germany's top wine producers). Needless to say, the group was very impressed with dry and complex Rieslings that were sampled in the courtyard, during the cellar tour, and at dinner.

Early Wednesday morning we left our small hotel in Osthofen for a short trip to Hochschule Karlsruhe (HKA) / University of Applied Sciences. After talking with both students and professors in their Institute of Energy Efficient Mobility, Institute of Refrigeration, A/C, & Environmental Engineering, and Automation Lab, we were led on a walking tour of their facilities where we witnessed how the students were truly applying the science they learned in the classroom. HKA is a former polytechnical school, and all faculty are required to come from industry.

In the afternoon, the group had some free time to explore historic Heidelberg, considered to be one of the most beautiful cities in Germany. With the castle which overlooks the city, the Baroque Old Town, and the Old Bridge over the Neckar River, it is easy to see why so many tourists flock to the city. We ended the day in Worms, where the weather was perfect for an outdoor dinner under the trees at Brauhaus Zwolf Apostel.

Thursday morning, we were promptly on the bus for a short drive to Hanau for a meeting at Evonik Industries. Our meeting started with a discussion about Evonik's corporate values, and how those values are embedded in their recruiting and hiring practices. While the company is known for its robust trainee and apprenticeship programs for young professionals and recent graduates in the chemical industry, they also have programs for engineering, supply chain, and marketing. With hard-hats and safety glasses, we proceeded to tour the company's apprenticeship center and lipid production facilities. As part of a strategic partnership with vaccine manufacturer Pfizer-BioNTech, Evonik expanded lipid production in Hanau; lipids are fundamental to produce highly effective mRNA-based vaccines, and Evonik is one of the few companies capable of producing them at a commercial scale.

Our trip concluded in Frankfurt; after Arndt Siepmann gave everyone a crash tutorial on how to ride the u-bahn, we had an engaging dinner with Christoph Doerr, Director for the Alabama Department of Commerce's European Office. We said our farewells to old friends and new, and reflected on the exhilarating week that was. Some members stayed for additional business meetings, some stayed to visit friends and family, and a few ventured on to Munich for an additional cultural experience.

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We had several gracious sponsors throughout the trip, and cannot thank them enough for their support:

The University of Alabama – College of Engineering, Center for Advanced Vehicle Technologies
Auburn University – Samuel Ginn College of Engineering
Industrial Development Board of the City of Auburn
Alabama Department of Commerce

Of course, the common denominator for all successful AGP events is Tine Hoffmeister. She makes everything look easy, but we all know – and appreciate – the time and effort it takes to make this magic happen. We could not have done it without her.

The trip was an incredible experience for all involved, and truly succeeded in its mission. We are very grateful for the AGP members that were able to join us this year, and look forward to another rewarding experience in 2024. Until then, we hope to see you at one of the many upcoming AGP events – and of course at our annual dinner celebration at the end of February.