

2024 AGP Study Trip to Germany

Mike Brooks, AGP Chair

The AGP Study Trip never disappoints; every trip helps to foster existing relationships – and can provide the spark that ignites new opportunities. This time and a group of 12 participants travelled to Cologne in mid-September for an incredible opportunity to learn more about German culture, education, and industry.

To shake off the jet lag, the trip started with a short walking tour of Cologne – with a stop at the most-visited attraction in Germany: The Cologne Cathedral is the tallest twin-spired church in the world – a Gothic masterpiece at 515 feet tall. While construction began in 1248, it wasn't finished until 1560; clearly the road crew on I-65 is on the same schedule, albeit with a much less attractive outcome. Our guide was a former US Marine, who has been living in Cologne for several years. He was an engaging storyteller and showed the historic Town Hall and its *interesting* statues (Google with caution), Roman ruins – surrounded by a parking deck, the Alter Markt, a short stroll along the Rhine, and the world's oldest perfume company (Farina, 1709) – which according to Dr. Gramberg, “Ja, smells like Oma.” The evening concluded with a huge schweinshaxe (crispy pork knuckle) and a sampling of Kolsch beer, served in classic 0.2-liter glasses.

On Monday we started at RWTH Aachen University, a public research university with over 47,000 students; almost 1/3 are international students. It is widely regarded as one of the leading technical universities in Europe – and is sometimes referred to as “the MIT of Germany.” We learned about the impressive exchange programs or collaborative efforts between Aachen and institutions around the world; the group met with representatives from computer science and mechanical engineering, and concluded with a tour of their Collective Incubator.

Tuesday began in Ahlen, with an incredible tour of Winkelman Flowform Technology, a business unit of Winkelman Group, which has been family-owned since 1898. Globally, they are recognized as one of the leaders in the field of metal forming in a wide range of industrial sectors. Their operation in the Auburn Industrial Park is home to the largest vertical flow-forming machinery in the Americas and serves the aerospace and defense industries as well as the commercial vehicle and oil and gas industry. The tour concluded with a discussion of the company's goal to become 100% energy self-sufficient (“off-the-grid”) using only renewable energy sources.

Immer Besser (Always Better) is the motto at Miele, a manufacturer of high-end domestic appliances and commercial equipment – and the gracious host of our delegation on Wednesday. Globally, the family-run enterprise - now in its fourth generation - employs a workforce of around 22,300. Their facility in Opelika is their first in the US and will allow them to more quickly serve their largest market outside of Germany – and with a smaller carbon footprint. The first ovens – “super-sized to meet US consumer demands” - are expected to ship in November! After an incredible tour of their cooking unit manufacturing facility, we learned about the apprenticeship model at Miele – and how they are able to recruit and retain a talented and dedicated workforce. The visit concluded with a guided tour through the company museum, which traced their manufacturing history from butter churning to clothes washing, from vacuum cleaners to motorized bicycles, dishwashers to ranges, and yes – even automobiles. Our day in Gütersloh ended at a great local restaurant, with special guests from Miele's leadership group in Germany – and Alabama.

Our final day of meetings started at FH Münster University for Applied Science; with almost 15,000 students – including some 1200 international students, and 57 degree programs, it is the largest

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university of applied science in Germany. We visited the campus in Steinfurt, home to 4700 students, five engineering departments, and the Münster Center for Interdisciplinarity. The university has established almost 300 partnerships with other universities around the world. After an overview from their International Office, our delegation broke into smaller groups to meet directly with key contacts from various engineering disciplines. The day concluded at the Münster Electrochemical Energy Technology (MEET) at the University of Münster; we learned more about their Battery Research Center, which covers the optimization of the market-dominant lithium-ion technology and new approaches such as solid-state batteries and lithium-free battery concepts. From our delegation, Dr. Tae-Sik Oh, Associate Professor of Chemical Engineering at Auburn University, and Dr. Josh Bittle (via Zoom), Associate Professor & Director at the Center for Advanced Vehicle Technologies at the University of Alabama, provided updates on the research and projects underway here in Alabama. We are all looking forward to seeing what partnerships (and research) develop from this meeting!

Several gracious sponsors supported the delegation throughout the trip, and we cannot thank them enough:

Auburn University – Samuel Ginn College of Engineering

The University of Alabama – College of Engineering, Center for Advanced Vehicle Technologies

Alabama Department of Commerce – European Office

This trip would not have happened without the diligent planning of our Executive Director, Tine Hoffmeister. You can imagine that coordinating a group of this size – with diverse backgrounds and interests – across multiple hotels, universities, manufacturers, and dinners – is quite an undertaking. Thank you, Tine, for another successful AGP Study Trip.

The trip was an excellent experience for all involved, and truly succeeded in its mission. I would like to thank the entire delegation for their participation, comradery, and contribution towards AGP's mission. If you see them at one of our many upcoming AGP events, make sure you ask them about the trip; they can tell you the stories that won't fit into our newsletter. With the study trip complete, we will turn our focus to the annual celebration dinner in Tuscaloosa on March 6th, 2025!

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Alabama International Trade Center – The University of Alabama