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Worcester Polytechnic Institute gets record \$40m gift from alum

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 14, 2014

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During his high school years, Robert A. Foisie spent many hours racing model airplanes in cash contests, working as a store clerk, and delivering groceries so he could become the first in his family to go to college. But if it were not for the scholarship money he received, he would not have be able to afford the \$600-a-year tuition to attend Worcester Polytechnic Institute in 1952.

“There were no student loans in those days,” he said. “If you didn’t have the money, you just didn’t go.”

Now, Foisie is a man of means, in part because he developed and patented a valve for aircraft, the real kind, not models. And, he said, he owes much of his success as an engineer

and entrepreneur to what he learned at WPI, which is why he is giving back to his alma mater.

The school announced Wednesday a \$40 million donation from Foisie, the largest gift in the university's 149-year history, which will go toward student scholarships.

"I just hope it helps kids get the education they wouldn't be able to get otherwise," said Foisie, 79, who rose from humble beginnings in West Hartford, Conn.

"Scholarships helped me when I got started, and I'm trying to give back," Foisie said by phone this week from his home in Port Saint Lucie, Fla. "My family is taken care of. This is a chance to help people. It's the best use of the money I can think of."

Leaders of WPI said the gift will provide a major boost to the university.

"This is clearly a transforming gift for WPI," said interim president Philip B. Ryan. "It will enable us to continue to attract the very best and the brightest of young men and women who want to pursue a career in technology, business, and education."

Ryan said the scholarships relieve students of much of the burden of paying for college.

"It will allow them and inspire them to make all that they can of a WPI education," he said. "And it also instills in the broad community the spirit of giving back."

Before his latest gift, Foisie was already the largest individual donor to WPI. A university trustee emeritus, he has given some \$23 million over the years, including to establish the Robert Foisie Scholars Fund in 2009, along with 17 other undergraduate scholarships in honor of WPI professors who influenced his life. His donations have helped provide scholarships to about 580 students, officials said.

WPI will name its School of Business and a new innovation center in honor of Foisie. The university will also present him with an honorary doctorate of engineering during commencement exercises Saturday.

Foisie said he paid for college by using his savings, two scholarships totaling \$300, and \$20 a month from the Reserve Officers' Training Corp. He earned a bachelor's degree from WPI in mechanical engineering in

1956. He earned a master's from Cornell University two years later.

He went on to work as an engineer at Hamilton Standard Co. before becoming chief production engineer at Pratt & Whitney. Early in his career, he developed a simplified design for a fuel control valve for jets, which led to a patent.

Foisie also founded and presided over Matik North America Inc., an import, distribution, and service firm specializing in paper-processing machinery. And he owned a Swiss company that makes carton and package machinery.

He also has business interests in telecommunications and real estate.

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