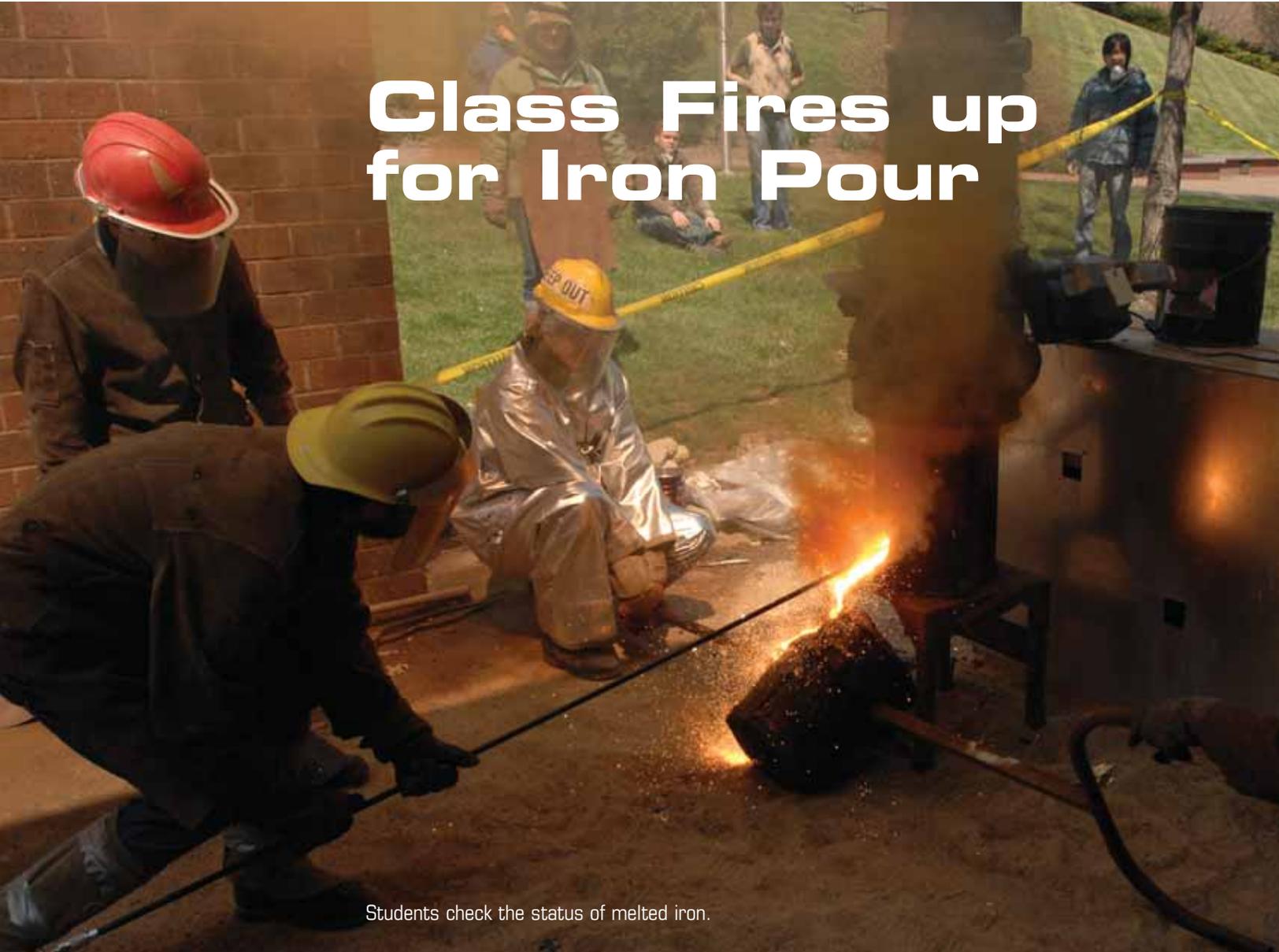


Class Fires up for Iron Pour



Students check the status of melted iron.

Sculpture



Part metallurgy, part sculpture, the art of casting iron is millenniums old. But ideas for creating art out of scrap iron were new and

cutting edge when 15 students in Mark Cowardin's *Sculpture II* class took part in an iron pour in the 2007 spring semester.

An iron pour requires melting 600 pounds of iron to 2,500 degrees F in a technique that is physical and dirty. The JCCC event had the excitement of a party alternating with intervals of serious concentration as a glowing hot crucible filled with liquid iron was carried from the furnace to the sand pit for pouring into ceramic molds. Dress code for this party was leather jackets, bibs, spats, gloves and protective eyewear.

"I love an iron pour because it is such a community event," said Cowardin, assistant professor, sculpture. "And more than anything else, it gives students an opportunity to try a different material for sculpture."

Students collected iron in the form of old sinks,

bathtubs and radiators.

"Cast iron is economical, costing 20-30 cents per pound as opposed to bronze which is \$5 a pound," Cowardin said.

T.J. Tangpuz, art lab aide, constructed the cupola, a small blast furnace that took the appearance of a totem billowing smoke and spewing coke ash.

"Pouring iron is stressful and fun," said Tangpuz, who spent most of his time stoking the fire or cooking iron.

Stoked from the top, layers of coke are dropped into the furnace, followed by layers of iron in a ratio of four pounds of coke to 20 pounds of iron. High temperatures initiate a chemical reaction that purifies the iron.

"Stoking the furnace is a stinking hot job," Cowardin said.



Other jobs are recording data, collecting melted iron from the cupola's well – about 50 pounds of melted iron per tap, heating ceramic molds in the 1,500-degree kiln, holding back the slag as liquid iron is ladled into the molds and pulling the molds after cool down.

“Aluminum goes from shiny to dull. Bronze takes on a patina, but iron can cohere into a lot of different finishes,” said Larry Dusselier, an independent study student who is building his own blast furnace out of old water heaters.

Cowardin, who has a BFA from the University of Kansas and an MFA from the University of Arizona, has connections to a supply of coke, a form of coal, which is dwindling in availability as iron industries have moved away from using coal.

Cowardin has won many awards and honors including artist's grants from both the Mississippi and Kansas Art Commissions. He has had exhibitions in the 2004 Avenue of the Arts, Kansas City, Mo.; the Newport Art Museum,

R.I.; the Bank Gallery, Kansas City, Mo.; John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wis., as well as a two permanent sculptures at Mississippi State University, to name a few. He completed an artist's residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center iron foundry. Cowardin began teaching sculpture full time at JCCC in 2005 and has his own studio in Baldwin.

“A community event like the iron pour is important so artists can exchange ideas,” Cowardin said. “Particularly important for sculptors because they have such a wide range of techniques. Plus a big fire is exciting.” 🌿



Student Larry Dusselier suits up for temperatures of 2,500 degrees F.

Intense orange, the liquid iron is ladled into heated ceramic molds.