David Drakes ’15 was still weeks away from graduating when he learned he had landed the perfect job for him: engineer at Harley-Davidson’s corporate headquarters in Milwaukee, Wis. Drakes, who majored in mechanical engineering in the University’s College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture (CETA), grew up around motorcycles and had always hoped to work with them one day. That goal shaped the way he lived his life in college, from choosing classes to joining extracurricular clubs and organizations.

“When I graduated [from] high school, I went into a technical program at a community college and learned how to take motorcycles apart and troubleshoot them,” says Drakes, who is from Enfield, Conn. “I actually didn’t even know I wanted to be an engineer until after I was done with that program. I realized I wanted to design motorcycles, not just figure out how they work.”

Drakes started taking engineering courses as soon as he transferred to UHart. In particular, he looked for classes and research that would give him the opportunity to put what he had learned to practical use. CETA Professor Ivana Milanovic was the perfect mentor.

“I’m more of a hands-on learner,” explains Drakes. “Obviously a lot of engineering is calculation and theory-based, but Professor Milanovic actually took the time to help me understand [how to apply these lessons]. She wanted me to succeed.”

Milanovic also encouraged him to help refurbish the on-campus wind tunnel lab, a project made possible by support from United Technologies and the Connecticut Space Grant Consortium. Drakes joined three undergraduates and one graduate student who were already working on the project. In fall 2015, when the facility is complete, students will be able to use it to study and measure the flow of air over airfoils and turbine blades, an important aspect of aerodynamics. Drakes and four other students have been involved in every aspect of the project, from disassembling the old tunnel to ordering all of the equipment necessary for the upgrade.

Milanovic says Drakes’s focus and enthusiasm are apparent. “When I announced the research opportunity [wind tunnel project] for our students last September, I was very surprised that about 15 students applied [for] just a few slots. The competition was indeed fierce. Dave was the first one hired. He had it all: intellectual curiosity, passion for doing and learning, and he presented himself very well. I had no doubts that Dave was the right choice.”

Drakes also served as the vice president of the Green 707 Car Club, a student organization that is working to convert a regular gas-powered pickup truck into an electric-powered vehicle. This project is still ongoing. In addition, he was the treasurer of the campus chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers. With these activities and an engineering internship at FlowTech in South Windsor, Conn., it’s no wonder Harley-Davidson came calling. And Drakes was ready.

Biking is in Drakes’s blood. His father was a road cyclist when younger and has always had motorcycles at home. Drakes says he has been in love with them all his life. As his career progresses, he plans to combine that passion with his larger goal of changing the world.

“I’ve always had a desire to help people around me. Engineering gave me the opportunity to do that, to make a difference in my community by coming up with better systems and a better way of doing things. That’s why I got into it, to help people and build motorcycles. Carbon-zero motorcycles, of course, but they will still be just as cool.”

Top: Drakes races his dirt bike.
Below: On a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, Drakes prepares to launch his career as an engineer with the company. Motorcycle courtesy of Gengras Harley-Davidson Motorcycles in East Hartford, Conn.; special thanks to Robert W. Szymanowski, general manager.
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