



AN INTERVIEW WITH

# PAUL G. SANDERS

2021 AIST PRESIDENTIAL CITATION RECIPIENT

Paul Sanders is the Patrick S. Horvath Professor of Materials Science and Engineering at Michigan Technological University (Michigan Tech). Sanders received his Ph.D. in materials science and engineering from Northwestern University in 1996 and completed postdoctoral research with Argonne National Laboratory and Harvard University. From 1999 to 2009, he served as a technical leader for Ford Motor Co., developing new materials and processes with an emphasis on brake rotors. In 2009, Sanders joined the materials science and engineering faculty at Michigan Tech. He received the AIST Foundation Kent D. Peaslee Junior Faculty Award in 2013–2016 and was named an AIST Foundation Steel Professor in 2017.

Sanders received the 2021 AIST Presidential Citation for “his exemplary leadership and guidance of the AIST Foundation Steel Professors. As the first recipient of the AIST Kent D. Peaslee Junior Faculty Award, Paul set the bar high for all future recipients to bring the steel industry to more universities. He willingly accepted the leadership role to encourage and form bonds between past recipients to ensure awareness of the steel industry will remain at the forefront within their universities.”

**Tell me a bit about your background. How did you first get interested in materials science?**

I started out in mechanical engineering, but I missed chemistry. So I looked for an engineering field that used chemistry, and that was materials science and engineering.

**How did you first become involved with the steel industry/AIST?**

I got involved in two ways. I became involved in the steel industry because ArcelorMittal was a sponsor of the Advanced Metalworks Enterprise, a student-run

organization at Michigan Tech that does industry-sponsored research and development. Later, I was made aware of the AIST Foundation’s Junior Faculty Award envisioned and then named after the late Dr. Kent Peaslee. I applied and received the first-ever award and that got me more involved in AIST.

**How has membership in AIST benefited your professional development?**

AIST has provided support for my work with students, especially undergraduates. The steel contacts and companies involved in our program add context and real-world experiences to our students’ education.

—

“Any time you win an award that is not ‘self-nominated,’ it means a lot. It’s great when others recognize your efforts, are appreciative and act.”

—



Sanders accepted the 2021 AIST Presidential Citation award at the President’s Reception during AISTech 2021 in Nashville, Tenn., USA.

In 2013, you were the inaugural recipient of the AIST Foundation Kent D. Peaslee Junior Faculty Award. How did that award impact your work at Michigan Tech?

Given my proposal to develop more talent for the steel industry, the award has given me a greater focus on recruiting and retaining students through our program. The flexible support has let me innovate locally and share our work at the University-Industry Relations Roundtable (UIRR) so that other universities can replicate our successes with programs like “Steel Industry Day” on campus.

This year you were honored with the AIST Presidential Citation for your role in strengthening relationships between the association and the AIST Steel Professor grant winners. Can you tell me more about this work and the importance of industry/academia collaboration?

Being the first winner of the Kent Peaslee Junior Faculty Award, it was sort of natural that I would lead communication with this group, plus I enjoy bringing people together. The Steel Professor program was an insightful AIST initiative to keep the Peaslee professors that AIST invested in involved in AIST and to further the relationship.

What can organizations like AIST and the AIST Foundation do to further encourage students to pursue a career in steel?

If AIST wants to recruit and retain undergraduate talent for the steel industry, a focus more on the experience (as opposed to research) is critical. For students these days, it is not so much about scholarships but experiences like plant trips, leadership opportunities and internships.

What does winning this award mean to you?

I was surprised and thankful. Any time you win an award that is not “self-nominated,” it means a lot. It’s great when others recognize your efforts, are appreciative and act. ◆