

News

Gateway Course Solves Community Design Issues

By Jessica Gresko
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Right now, anyone who wants to buy a "Black is Beautiful" T-shirt or one of Coreen Simpson's "black cameos" from the Studio Museum in Harlem has to go to 125th Street or place an order over the phone. But if a team of School of Engineering and Applied Science students has its way, SMH patrons may soon be able to place orders online.

As part of a new initiative this semester, teams of engineering students enrolled in the required first year engineering course, "Gateway," are working to find solutions to design and engineering problems for community organizations. Many of the groups, each of which has an alumni mentor, are holding their first meetings with clients this week.

While most students enrolled in Gateway will still be working on the course's group motorcycle design project, 11 teams spread throughout the course's five sections will be primarily responsible for community projects. Most of these projects are designing or enhancing web sites and data-gathering systems, but other projects include designing the layout of a new computer tutoring center for Community Impact, a Columbia community service group, and demonstrating the feasibility of a system that allows undergraduate tutors to communicate via video and electronic notepad with students at a New York public school.

"When you're studying design you learn a lot by working with real customers," said Jack McGourty, SEAS associate dean and lead instructor for the Gateway course. "[Through the community service projects] students are learning communication skills, teamwork skills, and project management skills." Moreover, he hopes students are learning social responsibility. "Usually when you think of community service projects you think about things like going to soup kitchens--it's a short term goal," said Laura Lamberti, SEAS '06, who is working with the Studio Museum in Harlem. "[But with this type of project you] have to go home and think about it and strategize and meet with people. Long after we're done with this project, other groups of freshmen will come in and work on it."

Tom Fazzio, SEAS '06, whose team is working on a project to improve internal communication and enhance the web site of Harlem's Apollo Theater, agreed.

"I think we all see this as a start of something bigger, as part of a long-term relationship," Fazzio said.



Courtesy of Jim Reynolds
 Engineering students enrolled in the Gateway course pose in front of a gallery announcement.

The community projects are also helping SEAS and its students form long-term relationships with alumni. The Apollo Theater group's alumni mentor, Chester Lee, SEAS '70, works as a project facilitator and internal management consultant for the financial service organization AIG. Through his position, Lee arranged for his group to look at the intranet at his company as well as a major law firm. The group hopes to build a similar system for the Apollo.

"I'm also trying to give them some pointers--help them work as a team as they would in the real business world," Lee said.

In fact, adding community projects to the Gateway curriculum is only one of the many ways the Gateway curriculum has changed and become more "real" for students. Last September, when McGourty took over the class, course organizers added a major advising component, and standardized the group project so all groups build a specialized motorcycle. Now the idea is to extend the course outside the classroom.

"Very near us here we have an inner-city urban environment with a really dramatic need," said Jim Reynolds, the SEAS Undergraduate Studies program coordinator and communities projects coordinator.

Reynolds hopes the projects will help bring the school and surrounding community closer together, which has happened at other schools with similar programs--including Smith College, Harvey Mudd, and Purdue University, all of which SEAS looked at in building its program. McGourty said the school was particularly interested in Purdue's Engineering Projects in Community Service program, which began in 1995 and has chapters at nine other universities.



Courtesy of Jim Reynolds
Deidre Scott, manager of technology and digital media, and Jaimie Glover, museum store manager, show off the current SMH exhibit.

While McGourty hopes to look further into these programs in the future, SEAS's first projects are just getting off the ground.

Employers say they are looking forward to working with the students and excited to see what they produce. Aisha Jafri, site director of Project HEALTH, said that students working for her organization will build a web site that will be an invaluable New York-specific complement to the national organization's web site.

"I think that the web site will increase our publicity and outreach to the school and to the community and further our development and time efficiency," Jafri said.

Currently, Jafri said that she spends a lot of time responding to e-mails asking about Project HEALTH meeting times or about obtaining forms. Putting meeting times and Project HEALTH forms up on the web site will leave her free to attend to other business, she said.

In addition to learning how to address clients' specific needs, students are learning how to present themselves and their ideas. Jervis Nunez, director of information technology at the Apollo Theater, said that before he met the students working for his organization, he knew the project would be creative and well-done.

"I knew it would be a good project. Then I met them and I changed my mind and thought 'this will be a professional project' in terms of quality," he said.

Gil Lopez, who works to create systems that allow communication between Columbia and New York public schools, knows exactly what Columbia students are capable of and says that is why Columbia should be even more involved in the surrounding community.

"It's something Columbia University should be doing more of. The private university is a very powerful institution. It simply has resources that the city college doesn't," Lopez said.

Community project coordinators Reynolds and McGourty agree.

They say they plan to continue the project next year and hope to expand. While next year they plan on having roughly the same number of projects, they are already looking at ways to bring this year's community participants back as mentors or participants, and to have new groups build off of this year's projects and continue relationships with the same organizations.

In addition, Reynolds and McGourty said that SEAS hopes to work with some of the organizations over the summer and might use funds to sponsor student internships at those sites.

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