LOCAL NEWS

CMU brain power boosts charities

By Steve Levin
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For 14 weeks this semester, Carnegie Mellon University senior Brian Cooke had Beanie Babies on his mind. He also spent more than 100 hours thinking about ring binders, pantyhose and children's clothes.

But it was time well spent for Cooke, 21, and the other five seniors on his team in the Information Systems Applications class they were taking. And it worked out great for the Pittsburgh Community Storehouse, a nonprofit organization that takes donated nonperishable goods and distributes them to charitable groups.

For the Carnegie Mellon class, Cooke's team designed and built a Web-based solution for the storehouse that gives it the ability to track inventory and improve overall management, while allowing its members to view available goods and submit wish lists.

There was an added benefit, said Cooke, a native of Baltimore.

"It helps reduce paperwork," he said.

Cooke's team and 11 other student groups presented their work Friday at Carnegie Mellon. Professor Cleotilde Gonzalez, who taught the course, estimated that the students donated about $1 million in time and work to the participating nonprofit groups, which included North Hills Community Outreach, the Pittsburgh Zoo & Aquarium, Operation Safety Net, Light of Life Ministries and Fallingwater.

The course, which has been providing such help for 10 years, is part of the Information Systems program in the school's College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The fall course is required of all information and decision systems majors, Gonzalez said. That major, formerly known as information systems, often leads to graduates working in consulting companies, large corporations, Internet start-ups and information companies.

"Our focus is developing solutions to business problems," Gonzalez said. "At the beginning of the course, all we have ... is a problem. At the end, you see a solution [for] that problem."

The course requires students not only to select, design, implement and test the technological underpinnings of their projects, but also to deal with clients who may not be up to date on certain technologies or even know what system they need to improve their business.

Nonprofit organizations have heard about the Carnegie Mellon course through word of mouth, Gonzalez said. It costs them nothing; they only have to make time to meet with the students.

This semester, her first teaching the course, Gonzalez assigned six-member teams to work with various nonprofit groups. She tried to give the teams an interdisciplinary tint: While some students may have been more adept with computer technology, others were better versed in research methods or writing.

Contracts were drawn up delineating mutual responsibilities between the teams and their nonprofit groups. The class met three times a week, and each week the teams delivered agendas for their work along with progress reports. Gonzalez estimated that each student spent at least an additional 10 hours a week on the project.

"At the end [of the semester], I'm sure that they did not sleep for several days," she said.

Kim Celone's team was assigned to work with Operation Safety Net, the innovative outreach program at Mercy Hospital of Pittsburgh, Uptown, which provides medical care, support and referral services to the homeless.

The 21-year-old Celone had never heard of Operation Safety Net. Over the course of the semester she realized that "they do some of the most noble work I have seen."

"I also learned that I do not spend enough time giving back to the community in which I live. I hope I get to continue my relationship with [Operation Safety Net] after this semester is over," she said.

Celone and her teammates developed a Web-based database that allows Operation Safety Net's doctors and nurses to access the medical records of the hundreds of homeless patients they serve by using hand-held computers in the field.

Previously, the staff carried bulky paper files without ever knowing which clients they might see.

To ensure that their solution worked, the students guided the nonprofit program in the purchase of all the necessary computer hardware.

"The group of Carnegie Mellon students was very committed to this project," said Linda Sheets, program administrator for Operation Safety Net. "It was a joint partnership where we looked at a number of options.

"Figuring out what was best for the future led to our decision. The least amount of paper but with more accurate and useful information was [what was] going to serve our patients the best."

For students, Gonzalez said the course's biggest benefit was getting out of the classroom and into the daily business of the nonprofit groups.

"This is something many of the companies that hire these students want to see — that they have real-world experience," she said.

Nonprofit groups interested in participating in future Information Systems Applications classes at Carnegie Mellon can contact the Center for University Outreach at 412-268-7801.