

STUDENTS GAIN SKILLS WHILE GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

by Martina Jordaan

A community-based project, which is compulsory for all undergraduate students, has been introduced by the EBIT (Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology) Faculty at the University of Pretoria (UP). UP is one of the first universities in South Africa to incorporate such a module into its undergraduate courses.

The main objective of this initiative is for students to create community service related projects that will have beneficial impacts on society. Students are also encouraged to work with a community that does not necessarily share the same social background as they do. It's hoped that by doing so the students will develop personal, social and cultural values as well as multi-disciplinary life skills, such as communication, interpersonal and leadership abilities.

Involvement in their broader communities will also encourage students to broaden their own horizons, perspectives and experiences. Community-based learning also engenders a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness. It creates a new level of sharing of responsibility and commitment to an issue or cause. This module enhances what is being taught by extending student learning beyond the classroom into the community. The eight-credit module is a web-supported course and operates on a project-orientated basis. Students may opt to become involved in an established project or they can submit a

project proposal for evaluation and approval. Students attend compulsory orientation sessions before they start with their project. Projects should deal with addressing the needs of the community with regard to the use of computers; accessing the Internet; assisting high school learners in maths and science; upgrading environmental centres; and transferring skills to unskilled and unemployed people.

Projects can be executed by individual students or in a team set-up. A prerequisite for team projects is that a distinct task be allocated to each of the team members so that each person is assessed individually. Multi-disciplinary project teams will be encouraged and lecturers from across the EBIT Faculty are being encouraged to participate.

Students are also taken on excursions so that they can get a better understanding of the community they will be working in. This allows them to make more informed choices on what projects they want to be involved in.

Community service-related activities are an important aspect of academics' work. In the final analysis, community-based learning should, in essence, answer questions about the way universities go about preparing students for the future and if students are being enabled to become creative, active and critical citizens. ●

Go to <http://www.up.ac.za/ebit/community.html> for more information.

Doctor Martina Jordaan is a senior lecturer in the School of Engineering, and coordinator of the Community Development module at the University of Pretoria.



→ Erick Wessels assisted Grade 9 Eersterust learners with Mathematics at Eersterust Secondary School.



→ Liezl Nordier and Johan de Villiers assisted with the computer centre at Bathokwa Primary School in Atteridgeville.