



USF computer science students help local schools

Randolph Fillmore
Ken Christensen

TAMPA, Fla. (Dec. 7, 2004) Through a USF community service program called "CSE Volunteers," computer science, computer engineering and information systems students in the University of South Florida's College of Engineering are volunteering with Hillsborough County's School District.

This past semester, 14 computer science and engineering students - undergraduates and graduates - volunteered at six Hillsborough County schools, five elementary schools and one high school, for four hours every week. They worked alongside the county's Instructional Information and Technology Division staff helping to manage the district's large-scale Information Technology operations. Last week, faculty and officials from the Hillsborough County school system recognized their efforts with an appreciation luncheon.

"We really appreciated their efforts," said Sharon Zulli, who supervises the school system's IT call center and sends out field techs from its pool of 18 to troubleshoot IT problems at the system's 240 school sites. The USF student volunteers rode with the techs or visited pre-assigned schools.

"This was a win-win program," said USF computer science professor Ken Christensen, one of the moving forces behind CSE Volunteers. "The schools received much needed technical support and our students got hands-on experience in trouble shooting and building the computer capabilities of the schools they worked in, plus they got independent study credit."

Next year, the program will expand to more schools and a greater number of students will participate, said computer science professor Dewey Rundus, co-developer of the pilot program.



Photo by Mike McNew

USF faculty, student volunteers and Hillsborough County School system IT team leaders

According to Michael Studenberg, one of the school system's technical field representatives who covers the northern part of the county and 34 sites, the USF volunteers got a lot of experience in developing and implementing solutions to a variety of IT problems, such as patch management, anti-virus activity and removing spyware. In addition, the students brought news ideas and fresh eyes to many of the long-term problems. From day one, the students got down to serious business and took on some unexpected challenges. For example, Clark Elementary had all Macintosh computers.

"We quickly learned the ins and outs of those machines and were able to start working on a mountain of work requests the tech person at Clark didn't have time to do," said CSE student David Kuczynski. "After we caught up we installed network cards, diagnosed some hardware problems and figured out how to get their computers to display to televisions."

CSE volunteers at Pizzo Elementary knew right away there were not enough PCs at the school, although there were a lot of computer components.

"We couldn't buy more computers, so we revamped the old PCs USF and other organizations had donated to the school," said USF volunteer Priya Pupala. "We sorted out and put together components, upgraded their operating systems and ended up with seven fully functional computers. We installed printers on the network, connected laptops to TVs and created an interactive Web site for the school."

Christensen and Rundus are currently looking for corporate funding to ramp the effort up to the next level so that more USF students can go to more schools and be even more effective.

"Our students have benefited by having to come to grips with real problems and, as a result, have expanded their technical skills while helping improve the computer capabilities in the schools," Christensen said. "Trouble shooting, networking computers and installing programs have been beneficial. Many will soon be taking on bigger challenges, such as expanding data storage, dealing with security management issues and computer maintenance."

Ranga Kasturi, chair of computer science and engineering, who along with Jack Davis, head of IT for the school system, handed out certificates to the CSE Volunteers, said that there are not enough opportunities for students to have useful experiences. He encouraged students and faculty to seize their momentum to make the program bigger and better next semester.

Davis, giving each volunteer a gift, noted that the USF volunteers had the ability to take their knowledge and communicate it to teachers. "It's easy for us to find smart IT people," Davis said. "But it is especially rewarding to find smart people who can work with people."

Students interested in becoming CSE Volunteers next semester, or companies interested in contributing to the program by becoming a subsidizing partner, may contact Ken Christensen at christen@csee.usf.edu.

-USF-

STORY SOURCE: Ken Christensen (813) 974-4761