Students look beyond borders for engineering opportunities

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Members of one of the newest student organizations on campus at Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman could probably argue a variety of topics if they got down to it. With participants from widely varying political backgrounds, religions and majors, they don’t necessarily agree on many things.

But there is an idea that stands out as one that they share, and is in fact, the reason they have been getting together.

“We believe that everybody deserves a clean glass of water,” Alex McDonald, a WSU sophomore mechanical engineering major, said.

McDonald is the president and founder of the WSU group—a student chapter of Engineers Without Borders. The chapter, which is now officially recognized by the school’s administration as a nonprofit student organization, is looking to partner with disadvantaged communities around the world and improve the quality of life in them through sustainable, environmental and economically sound engineering projects.

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— Alex McDonald
President
Engineers Without Borders WSU

“This is the exact kind of thing that I want my students to be doing. It’s helping humanity,” said Mat Taylor, staff advisor for the chapter. “I think we need to graduate people who go out and make cleaner water or cleaner energy.”

So far, the group has right around 20 active members, but it has been attracting about five new people every time it meets, according to Brandon Crane, a mechanical engineering major and vice president of the chapter.

And despite the name, the group isn’t exclusively for engineers, said Crane, adding that students from all of the arts and sciences programs are not only welcomed, but needed.

“What we feel that Engineers Without Borders can offer to the students is experience in all different disciplines,” explained McDonald.

He views the major factor that sets Engineers Without Borders apart from most other humanitarian organizations as being that its scope is extremely focused.

“We all agree that people deserve quality of life, and that’s what we export,” McDonald said. “We don’t export capital, and we don’t export religion; we just provide people with a better quality of life.”

Before visiting another country, McDonald said the group will study its socio-political qualities, which he also feels is unique.

The chapter is planning to take its first international trip in the summer of 2006 to Cachira, Columbia, a small community located in the mountainous northeastern region of the country.

While there, the WSU Engineers Without Borders chapter will work to set up a school bus that runs on bio-fuel—or agricultural waste—for children living in the rural areas that surround the town. Additionally, they plan to set up a water purification system for the area.

As with all endeavors the chapter will carry out, the project is being done at the request of residents of that community. The group will get help from WSU multicultural student services director, J. Manuel Acevado, who is a native of that area.

“We’re not in it to tell them that they’re poor or they need this and they need that,” said McDonald. “It’s always something they have said they wanted. Typically, it’s a clean glass of water.”

Closer to home, the chapter is already going strong.

The group is in the process of performing its first major project, which is to build an 80-foot solar-powered well system and footbridge for a nonprofit farm located on the Yakama Indian Reservation.

In early February, the chapter held a concert to raise money for tsunami relief in Sri Lanka, and throughout the year its members plan to bring movies and other programs focused on global awareness issues to the campus.

As their advisor, Taylor, who is an engineer and architect, would also like to see the group collaborate with other student organizations looking to participate in volunteer projects.

After Engineers Without Borders got underway at WSU, members began working with a group of architecture students who wanted to start their own group, Builders Without Borders, which Taylor will also advise.

“Hopefully, it will provide a learning atmosphere for the students who participate in these programs,” Taylor said. “The ‘without borders’ thing, that really fits the epic of what I think should be in education.”

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