Classrooms in the Community: Engineering Service-Learning Program Expands

By Jim Reynolds

When Raj Bakhru, Engineering ’06, enrolled at The Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science at Columbia last year, he intended to major in computer science, imagining himself spending long hours in classrooms and computer labs. After his first semester—and a decision to change majors—Bakhru found himself spending a large amount of time in an unexpected place: Harlem’s world-famous Apollo Theater. Did he change from computer science to theater arts or music? No, he changed his major from computer science to computer engineering.

Bakhru still logs heavy time in classrooms and computer labs, but he found that some of his most valuable learning occurred last spring when he and a team of classmates developed a sophisticated intranet system to help the staff at the Apollo improve their operations. The service-learning project was part of the coursework for the required first-year design course, “Gateway Lab.”

“I learned much more than I could have in any regular class—about working as part of a team and managing my time,” Bakhru said. “I also think I learned more because I felt proud of the job we did, and good about doing something positive for the community.”

This kind of experience was echoed by so many students that the Community Service-Learning Program has been radically expanded. It will now involve every first-year Engineering student in learning through service in the community.

“Engineers and applied scientists who enter the professional and academic worlds today need more than tests and homework to prepare for their careers,” said Jack McGourty, associate dean of undergraduate studies at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science.

“This program creates communities of learners who gain a deep understanding of how to apply skills and expertise in real-world settings. We think it also develops in students a lifelong orientation toward caring for and giving to others.”

This year, the program expects to engage the talents of some 325 students in more than 25 projects—supporting community service organizations whose missions range from improving public health, to preparing disadvantaged youth for college, to feeding tigers and polar bears (two teams of students have just started projects at the Bronx Zoo).

Having completed the course last semester, and moved on to his second year, Bakhru remains involved—now as a student-advisor to new teams of first-year students who are continuing the work of his team at the Apollo and starting new projects for other community organizations.

For more information on the Community Service-Learning Program, contact Jim Reynolds at (212) 854-9637, or JLR49@columbia.edu

The Apollo Theater prepares to celebrate its 70th anniversary as the musical and cultural epicenter of Harlem. Inset: (Left to right): Jervis Nunez, director of information technology, Apollo Theater; Shyam Kadakia, Engineering ’06; Chester Lee, Engineering ’70, Team Advisor; Tom Fazzio, Engineering ’06; and Raj Bakhru, Engineering ’06, at work to modernize the theater’s operational technology.