Payback Can Be a Good Thing

A couple of rich guys recently gave something back to the schools that got them started. Sean O’Sullivan, founder of MapInfo, donated $2 million to the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to create the Rensselaer Center for Open Software, while Ming Hsieh, founder of Cogent Systems, donated $35 million to the University of Southern California Viterbi School of Engineering.

O’Sullivan is funding the Rensselaer Center for Open Software so that student developers can perform work related to their academic pursuits during the summer months. Through the program, up to 100 Rensselaer students annually will be given stipends to develop software and content.

Systems developed at the center will have a broad range of applications, which may include: groupware systems for coordinating response to natural and man-made disasters; Web-based project management and monitoring systems to improve transparency and the accountability of donated funds; enabling and monitoring ballots systems to ensure fair elections; and neighborhood-based security systems to improve public safety and reduce crime.

According to Prabhat Hajela, vice provost and dean of undergraduate education at Rensselaer, the center will call upon such organizations as Engineers Without Borders, ASHOKA: Innovators for the Public, and Engineers for a Sustainable World to provide a series of seminars on best practices and applications software most critical for general-usage civil society use. The center also will seek large-scale involvement from collaborating companies and organizations in the global community, further opening new horizons for Rensselaer students.

For his part, University of Southern California engineering alumnus Ming Hsieh’s donation of $35 million is the largest of its kind when it comes to engineering departments. In recognition, USC is naming its electrical engineering department the “USC Ming Hsieh Department of Electrical Engineering.” Hsieh received his B.S. in 1983 and his M.S. in 1984 in electrical engineering both from USC. In 1987 he founded AMAX Technology and in 1990 co-founded Cogent Systems, which supplies automated fingerprint and other identification systems to governments, law enforcement agencies, and corporations around the world. He is currently president, CEO, and chairman of the board of Cogent.

When in high school in northern China, Ming Hsieh was given some old transistors and other electronics and began building primitive radios and television sets. With encouragement from an uncle, P.Y. Hsieh, who earned an M.S. in mechanical engineering from USC in 1952, and an
inheritance from his grandfather in Taiwan, Hsieh emigrated from China to the U.S. to attend USC.

"I will always be grateful for the engineering education I received from USC and I want to help others do the same thing," Hsieh said.

"We have a duty to our fellow man to improve life on this planet. While technology has always been a huge enabler in improving quality of life, we now are at a point where, through open software and open content, these improvements can come at close to zero cost, opening up opportunities to all," said O'Sullivan. "Particularly in Third World situations, but also in government and consumer applications, open source solutions can cut through economic, political, and social divides, and enable people to simply get the job done. This center at Rensselaer may very well become a model for accomplishing this. With the global perspective and global reputation of Rensselaer research, I hope this hands-on development center will both engage students and engage the world."

Nicely put.

Posted by Jon Erickson at 09:50 AM Permalink

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