

Nonprofits getting information technology help from IU clinic: www.heraldtimesonline.com

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Like most small nonprofits, Sycamore Land Trust cannot afford to hire an information technology specialist.

So when it learned that a group of Indiana University students would — at no cost — help the agency redesign its Web site and revamp its donor data base, it leaped at the opportunity.

“We are absolutely thrilled to have their help,” said John Lawrence, the agency’s assistant director. “They are a great bunch of kids who really know what they’re doing.”

Sycamore Land Trust is just one of four local nonprofits that are benefitting from a new School of Informatics and Computing information technology clinic called Serve IT.

Serve IT, which began operations last January, provides Bloomington-area non-profits with free information technology services such as database development, Website design, and technical support.

Lawrence said when one of the agency’s dilapidated desktop computers bit the dust, the clinic went the extra mile, replacing it with a refurbished computer free of charge.

“That saved us from having to go out and buy a \$500 computer,” he said. “This is great service they’re doing, not only for us, but for the entire nonprofit community.”

Lawrence said he feels flattered that Sycamore Land Trust is one of the first four agencies to receive services from the clinic.

“Maybe that means we’re the most IT-challenged agency,” he said, laughing.

How it works

The clinic has a director and two graduate assistants, plus a group of student teams that provide hands-on assistance to the nonprofits.

Nonprofits must first apply — either online at www.soic.indiana.edu or by emailing serveit@indiana.edu.

“During our first contact with them, we do a general needs assessment,” said Laurie Burns McRobbie, chairwoman of the clinic’s advisory committee that includes individuals from the campus and community. “We ask the student teams to do some strategic planning with the nonprofit, and also put in some volunteer hours there, to help them become more familiar with the agency’s culture and how it operates.”

Then, over a period of several months, the student teams offer the kinds of IT services that can best benefit the agency.

This semester they are working with not only Sycamore Land Trust, but the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington, Middle Way House, and Christole Inc.

“At this point, we don’t know how long most nonprofits will use our services, but we do know they can get multiple semesters of service,” McRobbie said.

Matt Hottell, the clinic’s director, said the clinic is already accepting applications from local nonprofits for the 2011 fall semester.

“We’d like to have seven or eight nonprofit clients, but that is contingent on a lot of things, including getting enough student teams together,” he said. “At least two of our current clients will continue receiving our services for another semester.”

Hottell said priority will be given to nonprofits that initially helped get the clinic get off the ground, and those that will provide a good learning opportunity for students.

“We are looking for strong organizations that just need a little extra help getting to where they need to be.”

How it began

McRobbie said the seeds for the clinic were planted a year ago when students in a School of Informatics and Computing graduate course — co-taught by McRobbie and Maureen Biggers — designed the clinic.

The students, six from the IU School of Informatics and Computing and three from the IU School of Public and Environmental Affairs, even came up with the clinic’s name.

The clinic was developed to provide students with real-world, team-based learning opportunities, and experience serving Bloomington area nonprofits with IT-related challenges.

Funding

Hottell said the School of Informatics and Computing has provided space, equipment and funding for one of the two graduate assistants (the other graduate assistant is funded by SPEA) for the clinic’s first two years.

After that, he said, it’s hoped that a for-credit course associated with the clinic will provide tuition income for the clinic.

The clinic has also received grant funding — \$20,000 from the Smithville Charitable Foundation and \$8,000 from the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County.

“We will continue to apply for more grants and have not ruled out some fee-for-service in the future,” McRobbie said.

Laurie Burns McRobbie

