'Virtual department' offers innovative graduate program

The new masters degree in software engineering is a joint effort among several Oregon schools

By Michael Hines
Editor in Chief

It's a new kind of math at a unique kind of school.

The sum of four Oregon colleges, several Oregon businesses and the Oregon University System equals one brand new, highly touted masters program based in Portland.

The Oregon Master of Software Engineering degree was approved by OUS in August and awaits final approval in October.

"Initially, it was started by Oregon industry," said University associate professor of computer and information science Michal Young. "They formed an advisory board and the universities held meetings with those advisory boards."

The result of the industry's initiation two years ago is that the University of Oregon, Oregon State, Portland State and the Oregon Graduate Institute of Science and Technology are now collaborating on the new program.

"I think it's relatively unusual and innovative," said Schafer, who has run his own software business in the past. "This particular sequence of study was unique."

It is rare that companies do surveys and petition for a new program of study, he said. Companies such as Tektronix, Intel and Mentor Graphics were key in starting this graduate program.

"The four universities got together and essentially pooled their resources," Young said. "It's like we have a virtual department."

The program is initially only being offered in Portland because the area has a higher density of possible students. Pilot courses began last spring with only a few students, and they continued through the summer.

Bruce Schafer, the program's interim director, said the classes are already popular.

"We were actually oversubscribed for one of them this summer," he said. One class had 50 students.

"The pilots had almost no advertising," Young said. "By fall, we should be getting something resembling real classes."

But that something will only partially resemble a real class because the students in these classes are so different, he said.

"These are by and large not traditional students," Young said. "These are people who have been out in the field a few years. They're very, very active in their own education."

By credits, the new degree is a two-year program, but most students work full time in the computer technology fields, he said, so it may take them up to five years to complete it.

"These students are very highly motivated," Young said. "The courses are very interactive."

The classes, which have so far included an equal number of men and women, are often offered in the evenings to accommodate the part-time students.

The uniqueness of the students and material has affected the professors.

"We found that we have to really change the way that we teach," said Young, who plans on teaching courses at the Portland site in both the fall and spring this year.

"I don't think it's the line on the resume they want," he said. "It's the skills they pick up."

Students who graduate with the new software engineering degree will be trained as team leaders and managers. They will be ready to move up in their companies.

Young said program coordinators are hoping that some of the companies will pay for their employees to go through the program.

"To be honest," he said, "these are fairly expensive courses. And we're counting on the same companies that said, 'We need this,' will be picking up the tab and sending their employees."

Each class comes with a $1,525 price tag, Schafer said, because the program is self-supporting.

"If you take a look at Oregon's software industry, the ability to deliver high-quality software products on budget and on time is critical," he said.

The trend is not completely new to Oregon.

"Masters programs in software engineering are popping up everywhere," Young said.

Eventually, coordinators want to offer the program in Eugene.

"The plan is in '99 we'll be offering some courses on a delivery basis in Eugene and Corvallis," Schafer said.

The software engineering program has a Web site for more information at http://www.cs.pdx.edu/omse/.

DDS: Group currently running one vehicle

ly, this gave DDS the right to tap $76,212.

ASUO Vice President Morgan Cowling told the Emerald in July that she urged Smith to be "cautious" with his spending to avoid any appearance of fiscal irresponsibility.

When Smith attempted to buy the $16,383 nine-passenger van in early July, the executive blocked the purchase order because of the outcome of a second DDS ballot measure. Students voted in the spring to deny DDS $22,200 for the purchase of a 15-passenger van.

"Students made it clear in the election that they did not want their money to be spent on a new van," said ASUO President Geneva Wortman. "Because of that, the ASUO felt it was in the best interests of students to stop that purchase."

Smith, however, said the failed ballot measure and his action were two separate things. "The intent of the ballot measure was a third vehicle. The intent of the purchase was a replacement vehicle," he said.

Currently, DDS' fleet consists of a 12-year-old nine-passenger van and an 8-year-old 15-passenger van. Smith said he wanted to replace the oldest vehicle with 1-year-old nine-passenger van.

According to Smith, DDS had done a cost analysis comparing the repair cost of the older van and the cost of a new one and concluded that buying a new vehicle would save about $1,500. "We can either dump a lot of money into an old vehicle or buy a new one. We felt our choice was the fiscally responsible one," he said.

Smith said he plans to ask the constitution court to interpret the meaning of the failed ballot measure.

Shortly after blocking the van purchase, the executive also froze DDS' entire $76,212 funding for about a week. "The initial freeze was to allow time to get the facts straight and figure out what was going on," Wortman said.

According to Smith, the situation prompted a verbal altercation in mid-July between him and Cowling. "I went through the roof," Smith said. "It was like 'Clash of the Titans.'"

Smith admitted that his "short fuse" may have made a difficult situation even worse. "It should not have happened that way. I've apologized to her," he said.

According to Wortman, first the original $26,212 PFC allocation was released in order to allow DDS limited spending and payroll during the summer. Later, the student senate transferred $23,788 to DDS on