SERVE IT

♥ IU SERVICE-LEARNING CLINIC MAKING BLOOMINGTON BETTER

Serve IT Assistant Director Una Winterman and Director Matt Hottell. *Photo by Shannon Zahnle*

BY CARMEN SIERING

Oscar Gonzalez is the unit director for the Ellettsville branch of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Bloomington, but when he talks about what his organization does and what it values, he could be speaking for many nonprofits.

The focus is on clients. Many of the kids who come to the Boys & Girls Clubs are from low-income and single-parent homes. "We offer our kids a myriad of opportunities each month," he says. "We bring in presenters to teach healthy lifestyle habits; we have dance groups; we discuss literacy and finance and careers. We need to let them know they aren't limited by their environment or their circumstances."

So when it comes to allocating funds, programming comes first. "It's not that we don't want to put money toward IT," he says. "It's that we can't."

Finding money for information technology is a low priority at most nonprofits. More often than not, they choose to spend their limited dollars in ways that directly benefit their clients.

Enter Serve IT

Serve IT is a service-learning course offered by the Indiana University School of Informatics and Computing. Students, who take the for-credit internship on a semester-by-semester basis, are placed on teams and assigned to area nonprofit organizations where they help with their information technology needs.

Serve IT was founded in 2010 by IU first lady Laurie Burns McRobbie and Maureen Biggers, assistant dean for diversity and education in the IU School of Informatics and Computing.

"We talk about Serve IT as a clinic in the sense that you have law school clinics that are part of the student experience and training of professionals in the field," McRobbie says. "This fits that model. We're giving students real-life experience applying the technical skills they are learning in their academic programs to real-life situations.

That idea has been around for quite some time."

What makes Serve IT different from other service-learning courses is that it serves nonprofit organizations exclusively, the way the service is implemented, and the makeup of the student groups. That distinctive makeup is no accident. The clinic was designed to draw women and minorities into the field of computing.

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—*Laurie Burns McRobbie*

The geek stereotype

"Research shows that at least part of the reason why women are not drawn into computing has to do with stereotypes about how the classes are taught, what student life will be like in those classes, and what the profession is like once you graduate," McRobbie says. "And the stereotypes revolve around several things that can be summed up with the term 'lone male geek.' They think it's a solitary undertaking."

McRobbie says there is always a grain of truth to every stereotype. "These young women may have joined the computer club in high school and been around these young men who are ultra-focused on the computer and, frankly, don't have great social skills and don't care about developing their social skills," she says. "They're in love with

the computer and they see it as an end in itself. Mastering the machine is what motivates them."

But the motivations are different for women and, to a certain degree, minorities, McRobbie says. "When they're excited about technology, they see it as a means to an end. They see it as a way to make a positive impact on their communities, on people's lives, on some immediate problem. It's not that young men don't do that, too. Many do. But if you looked at a graph, you'd see many more women would be clustered on the 'means to an end' part of the spectrum than you would men."

To solve real problems

It was this difference that motivated McRobbie and Biggers to seek out a way to make Serve IT a reality. They

felt a clinic where students use technology to solve the problems of the nonprofit community would appeal to women and minorities, the students they wanted to attract to the School of Informatics and Computing.

"We had this idea that using technology for social good was the hook, especially for women," McRobbie says. "This is true for first-generation college students, too. And minorities
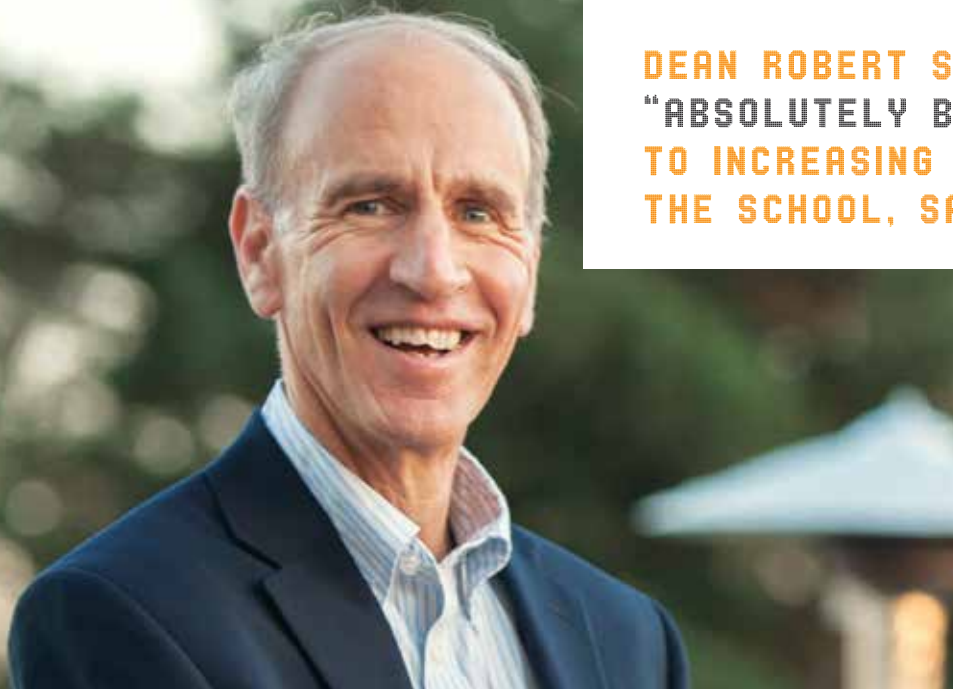
A triumvirate for diversity

McRobbie says when Robert Schnabel became dean of the School of Informatics and Computing in 2007, he brought

an "absolutely bedrock commitment" to increasing gender diversity in the school. Biggers joined the school as Schnabel's assistant dean for diversity and education, and, at about the same time, McRobbie became an adjunct faculty member. All three were committed to increasing the number of women and minorities within the school. They just weren't certain how to do it.

"The idea came about when I was having a conversation with Kirsten Grønbjerg [associate dean for faculty affairs] in SPEA [School of Public and Environmental Affairs]," McRobbie says. "We were talking about the technology needs of the nonprofit community and also the gender diversity issues in the school, and she said, 'Have you thought about doing a clinic?' And a lightbulb went off in my head. This was the solution. But a lot of things had to happen and a lot of people were involved in making it all come to pass."

McRobbie and Biggers discussed the idea and, in spring 2010, taught a graduate course called "Technology for Social Good." They gave their students the problem of designing the clinic. Their nine students, all from SPEA and informatics and computing, conducted needs assessments, focus groups, surveys, and interviews. They researched how to write business plans and looked for other programs like the clinic they were designing. By the end of the semester, they had designed the clinic. And picked its name — Serve IT.

(above) A Serve IT team strategizes. *Courtesy photo*

(right) IU first lady Laurie Burns McRobbie. *Photo by Shannon Zahnle*

How it all works

Matt Hottell has been the director for Serve IT since its inception. "Reciprocity is the key," he says. "It has to be a true learning opportunity for the students while meeting a true community need."

Unlike many service-learning courses where students go into the community asking nonprofits to create opportunities that allow them to fulfill course-required volunteer service hours, nonprofit agencies come to Serve IT seeking assistance.

After filling out an application, the nonprofit works with Serve IT team members to assess the organization's needs and develop a project plan. Then work begins on the project.

Each semester there are six teams of five or six students working on new projects for area nonprofits. Projects are generally websites or databases, but could be anything the client and team determine will increase the efficiency of the nonprofit.

"We treat it like a consulting firm," Hottell says. Student interns are placed on teams with a team leader who reports to a graduate supervisor.

The maintenance component

For clients there is another benefit that doesn't come from most service-learning courses. Since the clinic started, it's worked with more than 45 nonprofit agencies and every one of them knows they can call on Serve IT for technical support and maintenance. Hottell now has two full teams of six to eight students each semester simply working on maintenance projects for previous clients.

Also, if a project runs over a semester — and many will, given the nature of IT work — some students will leave the team and others will join it. The clinic was designed to take that into account.

"If the project isn't done and a student chooses not to reapply for the clinic — and many do, because they love it — then they hand off their work to the next person," McRobbie explains. "And there is enough continuity within the team that, even if they lose one or two members, from the client perspective, they aren't having to go back to square one and begin again."

Maureen Biggers, assistant dean for diversity and education in the IU School of Informatics and Computing. *Photo by Tyagan Miller*

A big deal

Because it is such a unique opportunity, being a part of Serve IT is a big deal. "The competition is intense," Hottell says. "But once students get in, they tend to stay. Most stay until they graduate. We have well over 300 alumni."

One of those alumni is Brittany Arnett. A member of the inaugural group of students in the spring 2011 clinic, Arnett, 26, now lives in Washington, D.C., and works for a startup company. She began with Serve IT as a junior and stayed with the program, moving through the ranks to become a team leader her senior year. She went on to get her master's degree at IU, so she stayed with Serve IT as a graduate supervisor. She agrees that highlighting the ways in which technology can solve problems and help people is what draws a lot of students to the clinic.

"Serve IT gives students a chance to see that you can be involved with technology and not be one on one with a machine," Arnett says. "We've seen a lot of women get involved because of the nonprofit component, the caring side of it."

That's what drew Liz Pomeroy to participate. Pomeroy, who graduated in 2012 and now works with website designers in Chicago, spent two semesters in the clinic. "I've always been into volunteering and giving back," she says. "I was in Girl Scouts until I went to college. I was drawn to Serve IT by the nonprofit aspect."

Getting right in there

Students get to know the organizations they will be working with in a very practical way — by spending 10 direct service hours with the nonprofit while working on the project. McRobbie feels there are at least two good reasons for this requirement.

"First, these students are almost certainly going to get jobs in the for-profit sector. For many of them, this clinic is their one opportunity to go into the community and come up against populations they might never interact with — the homeless population, domestic violence survivors, people who need to visit food pantries," she says. "We also require them to do direct service because, in order to create a website properly, you need to understand what that organization is doing, you need to know what their mission is, and you need to kind of feel like you're a part of that mission."

Robert Schnabel, former dean of IU School of Informatics and Computing. *Courtesy photo*

Those direct service hours often turn out to be very important to students. Steven Chen is one of three graduate supervisors currently with Serve IT. Most graduate supervisors are from SPEA, offering the student interns their expertise and knowledge about nonprofits. Chen, however, is a student in the Kelley School of Business. Hottell asked him to take the supervisory role because Chen has been in Serve IT since fall 2012, when he was a sophomore.

"That's when I learned about the direct service program," Chen says with a laugh. "Ten hours of volunteering? At first I didn't want to do it. But being able to go into these nonprofits we are working with, to be involved in their everyday activities, it shows us what they're all about."

Sydney Arnold is a junior in her third semester with Serve IT. "It's one of those things that's hard to leave," she says. While there were a lot of reasons she wanted to get involved with the clinic, working with nonprofits was a big attraction.

"I really like volunteer work, and I hadn't done a lot of it since I started college because I've been so busy," she says. "I'm actually from Bloomington and I've been involved with a lot of nonprofits here, so Serve IT helped me reestablish those connections."

The client experience

The student experience is one part of Serve IT. The client experience is another. As Hottell points out, it's a reciprocal

arrangement where the needs of both parties must be realized.

In the summer of 2013, a Serve IT team met with the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation for a needs assessment. Loraine Martin is the organization's outreach director, and she says the project the team started that fall lasted several semesters. Ultimately, the team created a database that improved Martin's ability to keep track of information she uses with the organization's educational outreach program.

"Our outreach program has been in place for 21 years," Martin says. "We've worked in Bloomington and a five-county area and those relationships are vital and important to Lotus. We wanted a way to keep that information as up to date as we could. Serve IT helped get that information in a place that makes our work more efficient, and that's a great help to any nonprofit."

She says working with Serve IT was a positive experience. "One of the things Matt [Hottell] emphasized when we first got involved was the client relationship: communication, having agendas for meetings, all of the normal things for people in the working world. They really prep the students for that and it shows."

Oscar Gonzalez of the Boys & Girls Clubs says his organization's experience with Serve IT has also been positive. "Our computers are pretty much all donation based," he says. "And without Serve IT to maintain our systems, all we would have are expensive paperweights."

Gonzalez says Serve IT offers two services to the Boys & Girls Clubs. The first is Teach IT. "They run computer literacy programs with our kids," he says. "Every day, technology is more important, and we need to make sure our kids are computer literate and capable."

The second service is maintenance. "They go in and scan for malware. Sometimes kids download viruses. When we have tech issues, they deal with that. It's IT support. Without them we couldn't resolve these issues in a timely fashion," says Gonzalez.

Making Bloomington better

When Laurie Burns McRobbie and Maureen Biggers set out to establish the clinic that became Serve IT, they had three motivations. First, they wanted to offer a clinic where students could get real-world experience and training in their professional field. Second, they wanted to increase the number of women and minorities in the School of Informatics and Computing. And third, they wanted to offer an important service to area nonprofit agencies.

Five years later, McRobbie feels the clinic is a success. Students are out in the field, working on teams and learning invaluable skills. She notes that when Robert Schnabel came to the school, only about 10 percent of the students in informatics and computing were women; now women make up about 25 percent. McRobbie says the number of women in Serve IT has consistently been higher than that, 40–45 percent. Additionally, the school's minority population is approximately 8 percent while the clinic's is about 15 percent. But, as Hottell points out, numbers don't tell the whole story.

"I think students find a home in Serve IT," he says. "It's a place where they can belong."

And, since it began in 2011, the clinic has helped more than 45 nonprofits with websites, databases, and other needs.

"We know Serve IT makes Bloomington better," McRobbie says. "And it decreases the distance between the community and the university. That was a particular motivation of mine. That feels to me like it fits with my role and what I try to do as first lady at IU." ✳