UNCP students create iPhone app

By Sarah A. Reid
Staff writer

PEMBROKE - Need to get your professor’s e-mail address quickly? There’s an app for that, thanks to six students in the University of North Carolina at Pembroke’s computer science program.

The college made a mark on the digital landscape last Thursday when Apple started offering a free student-created application for its popular iPhone smart phone and other devices. The software allows people access to UNCP faculty telephone numbers, a course catalog and a campus map.

Chuck Lillie, an associate professor in the math and computer science department, guided the students, who developed the application as part of a special projects class.

The program is being offered for free through Apple’s app store. Apps, or applications, are programs that can be downloaded onto iPhones, the iPod Touch and other similar devices. The programs perform specific functions.

With the UNCP app, users can search the student directory, call or e-mail a faculty member with a tap on their iPhone and view academic calendars and exam schedules. The app also includes access to a university news feed and nearly live video from one of three cameras on campus.

“I don’t know how many students have these devices, but a lot of them do,” Lillie said.

Eleven students started working on the app last semester, Lillie said. Six upperclassmen continued working on the project this spring.

“They learned how to do it,” Lillie said. “I didn’t lecture on how to write the code.”

Students organized themselves into small teams, and they provided weekly status updates to the class, just like working programmers do, Lillie said.

This semester, the students want to make the campus map interactive and add restaurant locations, phone numbers and hours, they said.

The students also want to add Blackboard functionality. Blackboard is an online program students use in certain classes to track grades, facilitate discussions and obtain assignments.

“If you are a grade freak like me, you can check your grades 27 times a day,” said student Christopher Smith.

Starting this fall, the apps class will be a graduation requirement for incoming freshmen in technology programs, Lillie said. Initially students will upgrade the UNCP app, he said. But later, classes could develop their own app ideas.

Student Michael Jurgensen said skills learned developing the apps could translate into a job. He knows of two open positions in Cary for a company that wants to create game apps.

Most apps cost 99 cents, and companies earn half that fee for each app that is sold, Lillie said. If a company can develop a popular app, it could potentially make hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars, he said.

“I haven’t gotten to the point yet where I feel really comfortable doing it for money,” said student Chris Moore, who served as chief software engineer for the project.

Students seeking high-paying jobs and the draw of innovative classes has caused the number of computer and technology majors to skyrocket, said Steven Bourquin, chairman of the mathematics and computer science department.

“Because of the work of Dr. Lillie and the students, the amount of majors in computer science and technology has increased,” Bourquin said. “It’s courses like these that really pique the students’ interest.”

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