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D80 conference encourages global change

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This past Saturday morning welcomed a densely packed Fisher lobby whose nearly 400 occupants eagerly conversed and waited for the keynote introduction to the first annual D80 Conference. The D80 center is an assembly of different organizations whose common goal is assisting developing communities to find and implement solutions that meet their needs. These organizations include International Senior Design, Engineers Without Borders, Masters International Peace Corps Program, AquaTerra Tech Enterprises and International Sustainable Development Engineering Research Experiences Program. This year also marks the 10th anniversary of D80's first project, which consisted of only one student and two faculty. Among the most interesting facts about D80 is that female program participants compose 50.7 percent of all participants compared to 24.4 percent average of other Tech programs.

The keynote began with a presentation by Professor Kurt Paterson regarding some of the challenges that the world faces, including climate change, water shortages, significant global health and pollution issues and a disproportionate rate of resource consumption in North America compared to the rest of the world. The following speeches by Provost Lesley Lovett- Doust, Executive Director of Engineers Without Borders and 1983 Tech Alumnus Cathy Leslie and Linda Phillips of International Senior Design harmonized to demonstrate that D80 is about using our expertise and resources to change the world. Leslie indicated that an effective way of making things better for everyone is to
challenge and reform conventional thinking from within workplaces and organizations. Furthermore, Phillips highlighted the importance of helping others, “Instead of asking, ‘what's in it for me?’, one should ask, ‘how can I help?’.” Phillips added that helping others is like eating potato chips: once you take one, you want more.

On the topic of food, the noon luncheon at the Rosza included many attendees who stood or sat on the floor while enjoying unique recipes. Many of the dishes represented Latin American cuisine because the majority of this year's service projects and proposals focused on Latin America. Many latino nationals in attendance were pleased to see projects that helped people in their countries who have less than them. “I am very excited to see my field of study applied to my backyard,” said Guatemalan graduate student in geology Rüdiger Escobar Wolf.

The prominent organizations presenting in the afternoon included the Michigan Tech chapter of EWB and International Senior Design. Unlike many organizations involved in D80, EWB operates without formal funding. This leads to employment of a variety of fund-raising techniques and unorthodox sponsorship by businesses like Jim's Pizza and Uphill 41. Their presentations included projects such as water purification microenterprises produced in the localities they will be used and a nutrition center in Honduras. International Senior Design offers opportunities for students to put their education into action by developing solutions for current construction programs around the world. Their presentations composed of students' designs for drainage systems on major intersections in Latin American cities.

A highlight of the conference was a presentation about Houghton high school's 2007 Bolivia project presented by Kyle Krym. His account of the team's experience in Bolivia detailed the importance of traveling to unfamiliar locations and learning about the different ways people around the world live. “People in the developing world have the will and labor force to build what they need. They just need the funding and resources” Krym said. An applause paused the speech when Kyle commented that the student group's Bolivian counterparts seemed happier with fewer conveniences. All the students who participated in the trip commented that they had a better idea of what they wanted to do in the future because of the trip. Their enthusiasm to learn and
travel served as an uplifting example for those of us in attendance. Although most college students aren't far removed from these students age-wise, their youthful energy is almost nostalgic.

The conference closed with a review of the progress D80 has made over the decade since its first project. Employing a food metaphor once again, Patterson depicted the increasing importance of international experience when he said, “What used to be icing on the cake is now the cake itself.” A moving speech by Linda Phillips narrated the significance of students' contributions before they received tassels to wear during graduation. The conference closed when attendees who registered early received D80 t-shirts produced by sustainable materials such as organic cotton and water-based dyes. It is an evocative gesture and reminder of D80's commitment to changing the world for the better.

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