Doing good downstate
Six Tech students will spend break sharing with youngsters
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HOUGHTON - While some students will spend spring break resting and relaxing, six members of the Michigan Tech Student Chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers are heading to Detroit to share their love of engineering with elementary, middle and high-school students.

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Michigan Technological University master’s student and National Society of Black Engineers member Yomi Famuyiwa practices leading an activity he will present next week in Detroit.

The spring break trip, supported by John Deere, will have the students giving classroom talks for middle- and high-school students at five different schools by day, and presenting three family engineering nights for elementary students at night.

Anza Mitchell, a third-year student working towards her doctorate in mechanical engineering and president of NSBE said discussions with students will touch on engineering, Michigan Tech, and college in general, as well as the importance of math and science courses, and tests like the ACT and SAT.

"Last year, we went to a few different schools, and I think some highlights were that we got students really engaged in engineering fields that they didn't know existed, or careers that they didn't know they could go into with engineering," Mitchell said.

"A lot of students got engaged when we talked to them about the fact that Beyoncé has a team of engineers. It's just letting them know that engineering isn't just planes and trains and trucks. There’s a lot more to engineering than your 'typical engineering' careers."

This year, Mitchell said the team has worked with the Detroit Public Schools to rework the program to focus on working not only to get to college, but continuing to work towards success both in school, and as a professional.
"We're getting them focused on the entire pipeline, from high school, all the way through to their careers," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said she hopes to encourage African-American students to pursue careers in engineering.

"There aren't as many African-American engineers, so I think this program is really important for the students in Detroit, who are mostly African-American, to see this organization here at Tech of mostly African-American students - we look like you, and we're doing this, so obviously it's possible for you to do it as well," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said sometimes an emphasis on having an aptitude for math and science can give students the wrong idea about being able to go into engineering.

"I don't think it's necessarily 'if you're not good at it, you won't succeed' - you just have to work a little harder. I don't like cutting certain careers off from children with certain backgrounds," she said.

The trip will benefit the teachers as well. Yomi Famuyiwa, a first-year master's student in Mechanical Engineering, said this is his first time going on the trip, and he hoped to be able to improve his presentation skills, in addition to providing education and encouragement for the younger students.

"Presenting will always be needed in industry," he said.

"I hope to get out of this experience just knowing that the students I worked with enjoyed themselves, and enjoyed me teaching them," first-year Mechanical Engineering major Rebecca Spenser said.

Joan Chadde, director of the Michigan Tech Center for Science and Environmental outreach, said Tech's NSBE student chapter initiated the idea for the trip, and has kept the program going strong for four years, collaborating closely with the Detroit Mathematics and Science Center to put the program together.

"They're really committed to helping students attain a college degree, and we really love to promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) degrees," Chadde said.

Though the presenting students and schools visited have changed over the years, Chadde said NSBE's commitment to the program has remained consistent.

"It's great to see them pass the baton. That's kind of neat - when you can have a program that can survive changes in leadership, that there's that common thread of commitment to wanting to do this, she said."

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