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Computing Students Re-Design “Cut Out Hunger” Website

Maximize Coupons to Donate Food to Charity

Atlanta (April 23, 2004) — Students in Georgia Tech’s College of Computing have figured out a way for their programming knowledge to help feed the hungry. They collaborated on a project that helped an Atlanta-area non-profit, Cut Out Hunger, dramatically improve its website with new, more effective and convenient features so cost-conscious grocery shoppers can save money and donate food to charity.

For their senior-level computer design course, computer science majors at Georgia Tech are required to complete a significant team computer project for their degree. Some students choose a project of personal interest such as for a student organization, and others may select a project for an off-campus client. This group of students—Karl Zipperer, Max Blinder, Daag Alemayehu, and Rick Arnett—chose the Cut Out Hunger project for several reasons.

“The most appealing aspect of this project was the fact it’s for a good cause—feeding the hungry,” says Zipperer, recent computer science graduate from the Georgia Tech College of Computing. “To me, it was a lot more motivating to know the system I was designing might help put food on some family’s table than to be writing a new system for an insurance firm would have been.”

“I enjoyed applying the principles I’d learned in my psychology and human computer interaction classes to this project to make the software useable for the user,” says Blinder, a graduating senior in computer science.

The project teams usually consist of four students who spend between 750 – 1,000 hours working on the project over the 15-week semester. Many students include this capstone project in their portfolio so they seek challenging projects.

Stephanie Nelson, the founder and driving force behind Cut Out Hunger, approached Georgia Tech because she knew her Cut Out Hunger website was inefficient and using old technology, but she didn’t know what needed to be done. Nelson founded Cut Out Hunger several years ago when she realized there are thousands of store and manufacturer coupons that never get used and that these unused coupons and in-store specials could be used to fill community food banks and soup kitchens. Her idea was that since in-store specials make some products practically free, so even if the item isn’t something one’s own family uses, buy it anyway and donate it to a food bank. The Cut Out Hunger website matches sales with grocery coupons available in the Sunday newspaper to maximize savings.

“We push our students to find a project that’s interesting technically but also has real world impact,” says Dr. John Stasko, associate professor in the College of Computing and faculty adviser for the team.

Stasko says the team concentrated on the architecture and database access for the Cut Out Hunger website, which greatly reduced the amount of administrative and upkeep time Nelson had to spend each week



Team member and graduating senior Max Blinder focused on the user interface for the new Cut Out Hunger website.
300 dpi JPG = 1,081 K

entering the week's coupons and in-store specials. The re-design greatly reduced the labor-intensive process of entering long UPC codes into a spreadsheet. In addition, Stasko says the team did a good job working with the client to understand her needs and design a solution for her. Nelson, an admitted technology novice, was unaware of the possibilities of automating and simplifying her weekly website updates.

Nelson says the new website and database system designed and built by the students has reduced her data-entry time each week from 15 hours per week for just the Atlanta market to 5 hours per week for 10 markets. The estimated savings for those using the Cut Out Hunger site is \$200 a month per family (10,000 current users) for a total \$24 million each year, according to Nelson.

"I am deeply grateful to Georgia Tech and these students for their creativity, their many hours of work, and their determination to improve the functionality of this website. Their contribution is worth thousands of dollars, and it will help retain more long-term web site users. As a result, more people will save money and donate food to feed the hungry," says Nelson.

"This project provided a great opportunity for us to see how writing code for a real world application differs from writing for a class project. I definitely feel better equipped to find a job with this experience under my belt," says Zipperer.

Cut Out Hunger is a volunteer effort that provides a web site listing the best deals at specific grocery stores in 10 markets including Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, Michigan, Ohio, Texas, Utah, and Long Island, New York, matching sales with grocery coupons available in the Sunday newspaper. The site's objective is to help people save money and to help increase food donations to local hunger organizations. The site is a free service.

The Georgia Institute of Technology is one of the nation's premiere research universities. Ranked among U.S. News & World Report's top 10 public universities, Georgia Tech educates nearly 17,000 students every year through its Colleges of Engineering, Management, Computing, Sciences, Architecture and Liberal Arts. Tech maintains a diverse campus and is the nation's top producer of women and African-American engineers. The Institute offers research opportunities to both undergraduate and graduate students and is home to more than 80 interdisciplinary units plus the Georgia Tech Research Institute. During the 2002-2003 academic year, Tech totaled more than \$660 million in research awards and expenditures.

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Cut Out Hunger

<http://www.cutouthunger.org/>

College of Computing

<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/>

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