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Building the Future

April 01, 2009 | Eric Brown

Before the Fall 2007 semester, the idea of graduating Liberty University engineering students was merely a vision. By May 2011, that vision will be a reality. With a comprehensive capital campaign, a robust board of advisors, knowledgeable faculty and bright students, Liberty's School of Engineering and Computational Sciences (SECS) is blossoming into a unique opportunity to train Champions for Christ in an innovative field.

"It's amazing what the Lord has blessed us with in our tender years," said Dr. Ronald Sones, the school's dean.

The SECS, temporarily located on the recently renovated third floor of the Arthur S. DeMoss Learning Center, consists of two electrical engineering laboratories as well as labs dedicated to faculty research, networking and software. Sones hopes through the capital campaign, the school will find a permanent home inside a state-of-the-art engineering complex. Funds are now being appropriated for the future facility, which will be located on Liberty Mountain between the LU monogram and the artificial ski slope.

The proposed six-story building is expected to contain more than 20 high-tech labs, an equal number of classrooms, a library, three study rooms and adequate office space for graduate students and faculty.

Leading the charge to expand the school is a reputable board of advisors comprised of business executives and representatives from engineering firms such as Siemens, AREVA, Babcock & Wilcox, Red Hat, Inc., Northrup Grumman, Simventions, Delta Star, Inc. and Tyco Electronics.

Other members include Richard Rawls, a private consultant for NASA, and Tony Brown, senior vice president of J. Crew Group, Inc.

Liberty graduate Aaron Mathes is the board's chairman and serves as the director of information technology and as an information security officer for Virginia's Office of Attorney General. In addition to providing the SECS with advisement and financial support, Mathes said the companies represented by the board will be a great benefit to students.

"I think [Dr. Sones] has put together a comprehensive program to attract a broad base group of students, and it's not just a traditional focus on civil engineering or electrical engineering only," Mathes said. "As the relationships grow, we're going to be seeing internship opportunities for Liberty engineering students."

Inside the school's current facility hangs a full-size, gold-plated wall plaque. Shaped like a tree, the plaque contains approximately 600 golden leaves. Liberty alumni and supporters who donate \$1,000 to the school can have their name engraved on a leaf to commemorate their generous gift. Sones said once the tree's leaves are completely filled, the school will have the \$600,000 needed to construct the foyer of the future engineering complex.

"We've basically carved up the building into many opportunities for sponsorship," he said. "The architects who put the plan together for us estimate building costs at \$25 million. With that in mind, we wanted the students and friends of the program to sponsor the main gathering area."

Entire wings devoted to the school's specific degree programs are estimated at \$2 million each. Other sponsorship opportunities include individual classrooms priced at \$50,000 apiece and specialized labs ranging from \$200,000 to \$500,000. Donors with gifts of \$10,000 or more will be recognized with a personal plaque displayed on a wall inside the SECS.

"Dr. Falwell approved a separate foundation, specifically for the School of Engineering," Sones said. "If somebody wants to help in this project, they can give their gift with the assurance that it absolutely will go to engineering."

The SECS is comprised of approximately 300 students and offers undergraduate degrees in four engineering fields — electrical, industrial, software and computer engineering. Along with the electrical and software concentrations, students can earn an intelligence specialization minor. Rounding out the school's offerings are three computational science programs, which include computer science, management information systems and web design and technology.

The school also plans on adding a materials joining and welding engineering component by fall 2010. Given Virginia's high-profile nuclear and military presence, Sones said the degree would be of great importance to companies such as AREVA, Northrup Grumman and Babcock & Wilcox.

"It's a very much in-demand skill set that is significantly underserved by higher education," he said. "We would be the only school in this part of the country that offers the degree."

As the school anxiously anticipates graduating its first class in 2011, Sones is confident the SECS will continue to grow and begin producing talented engineers who can greatly impact the field.

“The students that we have are just fantastic,” he said. “I am so tremendously grateful for the support from our administration. It’s a great start and we’re looking forward to a great future.”?

For more information about Liberty University's School of Engineering and Computational Sciences, visit [their webpage](#).