Clemson students engineer ‘driverless’ vehicles

By Robbie Ward
Staff Writer
rward2@greenvillenews.com
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from a few near-by discussions to re-

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SC only state without computerized enforcement

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Greenville, located throughout the United States.

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VEHICLES

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students, each expected to graduate in December. Years of study should soon pay off. Bureau of Labor Statistics show the median salary for a mechanical engineer in 2012 was $80,580.

But that’s not now, when the undergraduates must maintain focus on mechanical devices with a few quirks. Beyond engineering concepts and skills taught in the classroom, the students needed patience and critical thinking prowess to remedy the glitches, hiccups and setbacks they designed into the automated vehicles.

The engineering majors used other flavors of engineering, such as electrical, computer and systems that many had never formally studied. They made quick study of techniques needed for the project.

More than a typical final project or exam, this business-funded challenge added real-world consequences. These job-seekers have reputations to establish.

One of the driverless vehicles remained sidelined during the demonstration thanks to a wiring malfunction. Students responsible for the sidelined vehicle said they learned from their mistakes, how to work together, how to remain calm and use a rational skill set developed from rigorous studies.

“There’s an expectation to have an operating product at the end,” said Ethan Williams of Rock Hill, part-owner of the disabled machine.

The teams have two weeks to tinker with their mechanical creations until presenting the prototype to the leaders with the sponsoring business. Expectations call for a fully functioning, driverless vehicle ready for duty with few needed adjustments.

Ethan Kung, Clemson assistant professor of mechanical engineering, is teaching the capstone class for the first time this semester, his first as a tenure-track professor. He said the teams of students will finish the class with experience they’ll use in professional roles, many impacting public safety or success of private business.

“The ability to troubleshoot is something universal that applies to almost every field,” he said. “It’s impressive to see how far they’ve come in a semester.”

Some of the students will leave Clemson University with a bachelor’s degree and a few job leads but nothing concrete. Others have employers waiting on graduation day. Baxter Healthcare, a medical products and bioscience services company, has already hired one of the students, Addison Ridgeway of Greenwood.

Ridgeway said working with classmates on the driverless vehicle project built essential skills beyond the scope of traditional engineering classes. He said plans to start work as a critical systems engineer valuing teamwork and communication as necessary to achieve many goals.

“You can have an idea in your head, but unless it’s well communicated it’s not useful at all,” Ridgeway said, standing near his team’s mechanical prototype.