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## Students take technology to India

**Puente, a group of 12 Penn students, will build a community computer lab in India this week.**

By Nikki Cyter

The Summer Pennsylvanian

For some students, summer vacation is a chance to lounge on the beach or land a banking internship in downtown Manhattan.

But for 12 Penn students who boarded a plane bound for India yesterday, their summers are aimed at developing a technologically linked global community.

And when they land, this group of students will gain true hands-on technology experience by setting up a community computer lab in Pune, India.

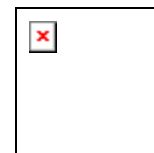


Jacques-Jean Tiziou/The Summer Pennsylvanian

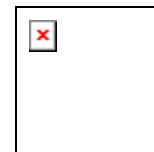
Junior Rohan Amin, right, and the rest of the Puente group organize their supplies before going to set up a computer lab in India. The group aims to "bridge" the divide between those who have access to technology and those who do not.



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The student organization aptly refers to itself with the Spanish word "Puente" -- which translates into bridge. The name, the group says, represents its goal of bridging the digital divide between those that have technology and those that do not.

"They have a great, advanced technology industry [in India]," said Engineering junior Stephanie Kirsch, a member of the group.

"But there is a huge difference between those that have and those that have not," she added.

According to Kirsch, Puente hopes to provide the less fortunate with access to technology -- and bridge that expansive gap.

After raising more than \$70,000 during the past school year with the help of corporate sponsors, the group will buy the lab's computers locally, in India, to avoid customs taxes.

The money the group raised will also cover the cost of networking equipment, Internet access and rent for the building to house the lab.

The ultimate goal, noted Kirsch, is to get the computer lab to a point of economic self-sufficiency.

"We had to set up a business model to cover recurrent costs," noted Rohan Amin, one of Puente's coordinators. "The lab needs to be able to sustain itself."

Amin, an Engineering junior, explained that the group will rent out the classroom-type facility at a hefty fee to local technology corporations for holding training sessions. The lab will also function as a cyber-cafe to help cover costs.

Yet though Puente's members have spent months planning and preparing, Kirsch recognizes that the operation still comes with its challenges.

Among other things, the group faces difficulties in training local residents to maintain the computers and the lab facility after they leave. The 12 students also must overcome the lack of a reliable, constant power supply.

"The key [to success] is not only to give them the technology, but to give them the information and know-how so that they can sustain it," said Amin.

To increase the chances for the lab's long-term success, a local board of trustees will be set up to oversee operations and ensure that it's use remains consistent with Puente's original mission.

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The board will be comprised of local business leaders and representatives from the educational and corporate fields.

The trip to India marks the group's second such endeavor. In addition to setting up computer labs in public schools in the West Philadelphia neighborhood, a group of students traveled to Quito, Ecuador, last summer to construct a computer lab.

Thanks to the facilities the Penn students installed, elementary school students in West Philadelphia now have pen pals in Ecuador. The group hopes that the computer lab in India will allow them to extend that cultural exchange.

According to Kirsch, Puente's goal is to be able to implement this same project all over the world.

She added that while the group doesn't have definite plans, the members want to continue the project in other countries.

"Next year, I don't know where we will be going, could be Africa, or Asia," she speculated.

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