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■ Serious Fun with Robots: CBRI brings robotics technology to local schools -
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Members of the Brooklyn-winning PS 21 team at the city championship tournament with Dr. Noel Kriftcher, CBRI Fellow Andrey Ivannikov, Prof. Vikram Kapila and principal Harold Anderson.

Five teams from local elementary and middle schools mentored by Poly engineering students put their new robotic skills to the test at New York City's FIRST Lego League Championship Tournament on Saturday, January 26, 2008.

A total of 80 teams participated in the environmental-themed event that set student-built robots on missions such as installing model solar panels on the roofs of tabletop LEGO buildings, moving fuel to power plants and running power lines to communities. A qualifying tournament was held in each borough to select the 80 teams.

The Poly-mentored teams are participants of the Central Brooklyn Robotics Initiative (CBRI), a year-long program led by Professors Vikram Kapila and Noel Kriftcher to introduce middle and high school students and their teachers to the foundations of robotics technology.

CBRI, funded by Independence Community Foundation with additional funding from JP Morgan Chase, began last August. According to Dr. Vikram Kapila, Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering, the object "is to work with schools in Central Brooklyn areas with a large minority population, usually economically depressed, with not a lot of science or engineering events going on."

To prepare for the FIRST Lego League, 10 CBRI Fellows (Poly students) met weekly with 10 teams from local schools to help them and their teachers design, build, program and test their robots.

None of the teams had participated in the FIRST Lego League before, making it especially impressive that five of the 10 made it to the city finals. Three won awards at the Brooklyn qualifying competition and one placed at the top in the qualifying round.

"We're very pleased with the contribution that the CBRI Fellows have made and the program overall," says Dr. Noel Kriftcher, Executive Director of Poly's David Packard Center. "Teachers are learning how to expand their instructional techniques, students are motivated to learn about math and science and they've seen the concrete, practical applications of math and science first-hand."

Next up for the CBRI is the FIRST Tech Challenge, a mid-level robotics competition for high school students that will take place in the spring.

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