The Coleman Foundation Faculty Entrepreneurship Fellows Program was developed by the private, independent Coleman Foundation to promote entrepreneurship and self-employment education. Every year, grants are awarded to college and university faculty members across the country who are actively incorporating entrepreneurial concepts and activities into their teaching.

WPI is proud to have a number of our faculty members recognized as Coleman Fellows for encouraging the spirit of entrepreneurship in our students.

Dr. Stephen Bitar, Adjunct Instructor, Electrical & Computer Engineering  
2010 Coleman Fellow

There is perhaps no bigger fan of entrepreneurship than Steve Bitar, adjunct instructor of electrical & computer engineering. “On the very first day of class I say ‘I want your resumes’,” states Bitar. “I want to know what courses you’ve had, what you’re good at, because I form teams of like-minded students who share the same commitment level to design something.”

As a Coleman Fellow, the friendly, self-effacing Bitar takes entrepreneurship very seriously. “I incorporate entrepreneurial aspects into the design course I teach. Students are given a challenge at the beginning of the course to design something, determine a market for that product idea, the features it has to have, what it would have to sell for to be profitable, and then figure out how they’re going to do that.”

In the past, professors would pick the project and ask the students to design it, which Bitar found counterproductive. “We’d ask the students to design, say, a stud-finder,” comments Bitar. “Well, you can buy a stud-finder for ten bucks at Home Depot, so students would reverse engineer one and they’d all design the same thing.”

In response, Bitar has designed a course that is essentially a mini-MQP. “Instead, all I’d say is ‘the theme is safety, and I want you to design a circuit that detects a hazardous situation and provides appropriate notification’. And that’s it.”

As a result, Bitar found that he’d get wonderfully creative concepts, such as a fire alarm for the deaf that was essentially a bracelet that “heard” the specific frequency of fire alarms and converted them into vibrations. “The good news is I have a course that generates super ideas. The bad news is the course ends.”

So Bitar wants to take it to the next level by having students form an MQP team around a good idea, take it to the WPI Collaborative for Entrepreneurship & Innovation, and perhaps even start a small company. “That’s my dream,” adds Bitar. “To help students with good product ideas see them through to fruition.”

Bitar likes the Coleman program’s entrepreneurial focus on self-employment but believes that most engineering students, by nature, are conservative and risk-adverse. “I’m trying to allay that caution and change their threshold for risk,” comments Bitar, “so I bring in successful young entrepreneurs to talk to my classes, tell them their success stories, and perhaps light a few sparks and plant a few seeds.”