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Rose women attend computing campout

Frederick Webber

The first weekend in February, Indiana women interested in computing gathered at a conference aptly known as Indiana Women in Computing (InWIC) which was held at McCormick's Creek State Park. Eight Rose students and professors attended the event.

"I was the honorary woman," joked Cary Laxer, Department Head of Computer Science and Software Engineering, who was the only man attending. Laxer served as the treasurer for the event. "It was to provide a forum for female students in computer disciplines," summarized Laxer. "To [help] build a network, to build a support group." Laxer also noted his own department's gender gap. "We are way below even the Rose-Hulman average," he said.

The keynote speaker was Assistant Professor of Computer Science and Software Engineering Lisa Kaczmarczyk. During her speech, Kaczmarczyk said she has heard female students say, "No matter how much I do, I don't feel successful enough." She wants these students to be successful. "Chase your passions," advised Kaczmarczyk.

Assistant Professor of Computer Science and Software Engineering Archana Chidanandan organized an activity called Birds of a Feather. "The idea is to allow people who have a common interest to get together and talk." Some topics were about various trends in technology, such as human interaction through the use of computers. "One of the topics was 'have you ever been phished before?'" said Chidanandan. Another discussed how to organize programs and meetings for women in smaller schools.

However, other groups discussed more serious social issues, such as experiences women have had as students or at work in computing professions.

"It's not one simple problem. I think it starts much earlier in high school, and you find you're the only girl in the class," explains Chidanandan, mentioning that some students thrive in that environment, while others do not. "You have to work doubly hard to prove to them that you're as good as the rest," says Chidanandan.

Another event was Lightning Talks. "That was really good, because in about an hour's time, you'd heard at least 7 different topics," commented Chidanandan.

Sophomore computer science major Amanda Stephan presented a Lightning Talk that won the second place award. "Our presentation was about cooperation between schools and furthering of women in computing," explained Stephan. "I did the presentation with a friend of mine from Purdue." The two got together in high school, where they were some of the few girls in the computer classes.

Junior Sarah Hegeman, a computer engineering major, won first place in the poster session.

Aside from InWIC, there are other organizations out to help close the gender gap in computer and engineering fields.

Stephan is the Vice President of Girls in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, known as gEECS. "We're trying to get more girls interested in computing at a younger age." Her friend is also starting one at Purdue.

These women aren't only into computers, though. On the first evening, "some people went caving, some people had ice cream," said Brittany McNeil, a sophomore computer science major. Some people even made 'geek' jewelry out of computer parts.

"The conference was a lot of fun. The whole inn was taken over by us," said Chidanandan.

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