

From geek to chic: The changing face of computing

May 11 2006

You don't have to be a nerdy white guy to be a computer geek. In fact, you can be a woman, a minority, a person with a disability or someone who is downright cool.

That's the message of a group of Florida State University professors who are participating in a 10-member university consortium. The consortium, called the STARS (Students and Technology in Academia, Research and Service) Alliance, has received a \$2 million National Science Foundation grant to recruit a diverse group of students to earn college degrees in information technology (IT), computer science and other computing fields.

"We want to encourage more people - particularly women, underrepresented minorities and people with disabilities - to pursue careers in computer science and information technology," said College of Information Dean Larry Dennis. "This program also helps FSU serve as a proving ground and model for best practices in computing instruction."

National reports show that broadening the appeal of the computer science field is essential if the United States is to remain a world leader in technology and science, according to information professor Mia Lustria, a member of the FSU team along with Dennis, computer science professor Lois Hawkes and research associate Anthony Chow.

"This is an issue of critical, national importance," Chow said. "The

alliance can make a significant, permanent impact by changing attitudes and building the necessary support to recruit a more diverse computing student body and faculty. Diversity is cool and essential for our future."

Fewer foreign nationals and immigrants who specialize in IT are migrating to the United States, and changing demographics mean there are fewer white men in the labor force overall. That means women and others have great opportunities to fill some of the 1.5 million new IT and computing jobs expected to be created by 2012, according to Chow.

But first a little image enhancement is in order. The nerd reputation actually poses a serious barrier to getting students interested in computing careers, Hawkes said.

In fact, one of FSU's roles within the alliance will be to develop a targeted print and Web campaign to shatter the stereotype of the antisocial IT guy. The campaign's "Reach for the Stars" theme will use role models to highlight market trends and career opportunities and will address computing myths - including the one about women not being good at technical stuff.

"Women often suffer from the 'imposter syndrome,' " Hawkes said. "They feel that they are imposters and couldn't possibly know all that their male counterparts do."

The consortium also will establish a Web site, www.starsalliance.org, to encourage students to learn more about how to pursue a degree and a career in computing. The Web site will include information about Student Leadership Corps, an innovative model that is a core component of the STARS Alliance.

The Student Leadership Corps, which will comprise 137 students in the first year of the project and more students in subsequent years, will use

peer mentoring, research experiences, civic engagement and professional development to support computer science students throughout their academic journey. Participating students will receive stipends for two years to help recruit and retain other students.

"We can close this gap with the help of our young people," Chow said. "College students have both the energy and the talent to be the foundation of this effort. They are recruiting their peers, younger brothers and sisters, and in some cases, even their parents."

Besides FSU, universities in the consortium are Florida A&M University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, North Carolina State University, Meredith College, Georgia Institute of Technology, Spelman College, Auburn University, University of South Florida-Lakeland and Landmark College, one of the nation's few colleges exclusively serving students with learning disabilities. The alliance will include K-12 schools, businesses and women's and minority groups in each community.

Hawkes said the alliance expects to make a dramatic breakthrough in effective recruiting, bridging and retention practices that could then become standard practice at alliance institutions as well as at institutions nationwide.

Source: Florida State University, by Jill Elish

Citation: From geek to chic: The changing face of computing (2006, May 11) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-05-geek-chic.html>

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