More female computer scientists wanted

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The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a new freshman-level computer science program aimed at enticing women to become computer scientists.

The Wisconsin Emerging Scholars in Computer Science was created by Professor Susan Horwitz, with initial grant support from the Microsoft Corp. Now, with National Science Foundation backing, the program is combining two core strategies: direct recruitment of new freshman students from underrepresented groups and parallel team-learning techniques.

Horwitz says those techniques had never been combined in a first-year computer sciences course and the strategy is helping increase the pipeline of under-represented students and improve their quality of experience once enrolled.

"The numbers are terrible for computer science and they have been trending downward so far this decade," said Horwitz, noting that UW-Madison women computer science undergraduates have gone from 11 percent in 2000 to 9 percent in 2005.

"No one completely understands the trend," she added. "Some of it may stem from the dot-com bust and a sense that outsourcing may be threatening future jobs. But we're actually looking at a huge pending shortage in the computing workforce."

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