

The impact of course titles on student enrollment

November 17 2016, by Naureen Ghani

In October of 1955, Ford marketing executive Robert Young recruited modernist poet Marianne Moore to name the company's new car. Although the marketing department had already created a list of 300 candidates, Young confessed to Moore that they were ["characterized by an embarrassing pedestrianism."](#) Perhaps the poet could be of assistance. In [a reply to Young](#), Moore proposed a series of questionable, albeit non-pedestrian, names. Notable suggestions included: Intelligent Bullet, Ford Fabergé, Mongoose Civique, Bullet Cloisoné, and Utopian Turtletop. The marketing team rejected them all, instead naming the car after Henry Ford's son, Edsel. The name ["Edsel"](#) has since become representative of failure.

For decades, corporations such as Ford have turned to artists for naming products, with varying results. Perhaps this explains why both a [cell phone company](#) and [computer giant](#) are named after fruits, namely apples and blackberries. In any case, the science of naming products is a fascinating one. I attended a presentation this past week by Melinda Gates and Regina Dugan as part of the Fast Company Innovation Festival. As I create data analysis tools in my research, I am always curious to see innovations in the technology field. Moreover, Gates and Dugan discussed a topic of particular interest to me: women in computer science at the collegiate level.

Computer Science Courses: As Told By Regina Dugan and Melinda Gates

Businesswoman and technology developer Regina Dugan achieved national prominence when she became the first female director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). She is currently a Senior Executive at Google. Philanthropist Melinda Gates, the co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, joined her onstage.

Dugan began the lecture by describing "the [leaky pipeline](#) problem as one part education and nine parts inspiration." The metaphor of the leaky pipeline has been used to describe the way women disappear from science and engineering fields (STEM) at all stages of their careers. Could course names be to blame? Yes, according to Dugan and Gates.

In 2014, the University of California at Berkeley renamed its introductory computer science course in 2014 from "Introduction to Symbolic Programming" to "[Joy and Beauty of Computing.](#)" That resulted in the [first time the course ever had more women enrolled than men](#). How could simply changing the name of a course have such an effect? For one, the new course name is engaging. Moreover, it can be attractive to someone with no prior experience. Although little is known about the impact of different strategies on course enrollment, research is being done in this nascent field. In a [paper](#) in Academic Medicine, a team of pediatric physicians compared two titles— one knowledge-oriented, the other behavior-oriented. The two titles were "Introduction to topic" (Knowledge) and "Talking with patients about topic" (Behavior), respectively. The study found that for every course, enrollment was higher for knowledge-oriented than behavior-oriented titled classes (average of 124 versus 89 enrollees per class, P Computer science has for the first time become the most popular major for female students at Stanford University as well. "Introduction to Machine Learning" taught by Professor Andrew Ng is one of the most popular courses at Stanford. When it was offered online in 2011, over 100,000 students enrolled. This ultimately led to the founding of the Massive

Open Online Course (MOOC) platform [Coursera](#).

This past September I worked alongside one of my peers to put together a [computer science](#) course as part of the [Columbia University Science Honors Program \(SHP\)](#). Columbia SHP is an elite science program that runs during the school year for high school students. When naming the course, neither one of us had considered how a course name can shape gender enrollment. We chose "Applied Neuroscience" as our course title because it was most inclusive of all the topics we intended to cover. In retrospect, we now know there are a number of factors at play in addition to academic considerations such as gender. Our course this year has equal enrollment of males and females, which is especially notable as it is a computationally intensive course. We believe that this is because students in our class, male and female, see the language of computation as integral to their knowledge.

How Course Problem Sets Maintain Enrollment

Once classes are in session, Gates and Dugan spoke of how schools must ensure that classes present a consistent set of problems that interest everyone, not only the male students. This is a novel assertion I had not once considered. Dugan recalled working with a team at Facebook to determine challenges that artificial intelligence could be used for. She spoke of how one woman voiced humanitarian problems while the majority of men focused on drone development. In designing problem sets for the [Columbia SHP Applied Neuroscience course](#), I merge my two passions: design and computing. In the spirit of Dugan and Gates, I believe translating passion and expertise in a field into creative problem sets is critical to the success of the course. In this way, I aim to seek the inputs of both the male and female students in creating future problem sets.

Conclusion

It is important for instructors in academia to choose course names after careful deliberation. What's in a name? A love of words and a sensitivity to them— course names reflect passion in an academic field of study. While there are no naming metrics and no real way to know if a name will help or hinder, professors should aim to attract male and female students in equal numbers and fix that leaky pipeline once and for all.

More information: Kemper, K. J., Woods, C., & McBride, A. (2008). What's in a name? Impact of marketing different course titles on enrollment for online classes. *Academic Medicine*, 83(12), 1187-1190.

Gabler, N. (2015). The weird science of naming new products. *New York Times Magazine* (2015, January 15) Retrieved February, 23.

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