University welcomes women into its computer science program

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At the University of Washington, 32 percent of the bachelor's degrees in computer science will be awarded to women this year, well above the national average of 14 percent. Courtesy Fotolia/TNS

SEATTLE, Wash. — Siena Dumas Ang loved dance and math. She planned to major in both at the University of Washington (UW). She had not thought much about computer science.

Then she took a few beginning computer science classes. Soon, she was in love with it. This spring, Dumas Ang will graduate with three majors: math, dance and computer science.

Computer science puts the best parts of math in one package, Dumas Ang said.

The things you can compute using computer science are "insane," she added.

Getting An Award

Computer science is a general name. It can include programming, hardware, networks, robotics and other topics.

In the past, almost all the people in computer science were men. Now, more women are getting involved.

At UW, dozens of women will get degrees in computer science this spring. In fact, 32 percent —about 1 out of 3 — of the computer science graduates will be women. The national average is 14 percent, or 1 out of 7.

Ed Lazowska is a professor in UW's Computer Science and Engineering Department (CSE). He said the university is doing well, but it can still improve.

The university recently received an award for enrolling more women in computer science classes. The National Center for Women & Information Technology gave the award. It comes with a $100,000 prize from Google.

Lucy Sanders runs the National Center. She said that UW has a strong plan to attract and keep women in computer science.

The University of Washington provides a "welcoming community," Sanders said.

Feeling More Confident

Dumas Ang experienced that welcoming community firsthand. She worked side-by-side with women computer science professors. Through UW, she went to the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing: a national meeting that honors Hopper. She was a U.S. Navy rear admiral and a computer programmer who helped write computer languages such as COBOL.

UW student Jasmine Singh always planned to major in computer science. When she came to the Seattle campus, the computer science department gave her a mentor: an older, female computer science major. Her mentor helped Singh adjust to college and gave her advice on what classes to take. Singh is now a senior. She is majoring in both computer science and engineering.

Singh said the university took steps to make women computer science majors feel more confident. There are female professors, tech talks by successful women, and coding competitions with female participants, Singh said.

Computer science may seem like a competitive environment that is filled with men, Dumas Ang said. However, her experience at UW has been different.

"Here, there's much more open discussion about the way women are treated," she said. There will always be people who don't respect women in computer science, she said. Still, Dumas Ang said the experience at UW is "really pleasant."

Closing The Gap

A computer science gap between men and women may begin before college. Young women often don't get to take computer science classes in high school. When they get to college, these young women may feel already behind.

That was Singh's experience. Even though she took computer science in high school, there were still times she felt out of place at UW. Sometimes, male students spoke about computer science using words and terms that she didn't understand.

Beginning computer science programs at some schools are designed to be very difficult. Maybe too difficult. Lazowska worries that this plan doesn't work. He said the students who fail out may be the ones who can bring diversity to computer science. In the end, more diversity will make computer science stronger, Lazowska said.

At UW, beginning computer science courses are challenging, but there is support for students. Working hard is more important than having had computer science classes in high school. Classes like this make computer science more available to everyone, Lazowska said.

Many women who took the classes "discovered they loved computer science and were great at it," he said.

Quiz

1 Which sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] helps explain why some students want to study computer science?

(A) She planned to major in both at the University of Washington (UW).

(B) She had not thought much about computer science.

(C) Soon, she was in love with it. This spring, Dumas Ang will graduate with three majors: math, dance and computer science.

(D) The things you can compute using computer science are "insane," she added.

2 Which sentence from the section "Closing The Gap" helps explain one possible reason why more men study computer science?

(A) Young women often don't get to take computer science classes in high school.

(B) Sometimes, male students spoke about computer science using words and terms that she didn't understand.

(C) Beginning computer science programs at some schools are designed to be very difficult.

(D) He said the students who fail out may be the ones who can bring diversity to computer science.

3 Select the paragraph from the section "Getting An Award" that summarizes the article as a whole.

4 Which sentence helps explain the main idea of the article?

(A) Dumas Ang experienced that welcoming community firsthand.

(B) Through UW, she went to the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing: a national meeting that honors Hopper.

(C) Singh said the university took steps to make women computer science majors feel more confident.

(D) There will always be people who don't respect women in computer science, she said.