

Wind Beneath Our Wings: Peer Support Groups for Undergraduate Women in Computer Science

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The presenters represent the Rice University CSters and the Truman Women in Computer Science (TWICS). Both CSters and TWICS are student-run organizations committed to providing a support group for undergraduate women studying Computer Science and dedicated to recruiting more women to the field. As women, the presenters know first hand the challenges undergraduate females studying Computer Science face, and they are working together to help each other overcome those challenges.

When the presenters began their undergraduate careers in Computer Science, one of their first thoughts was “where are the other women?” But over the last few years, they have been shocked to see that the number of women in their classes has gotten even smaller. Women studying Computer Science at both Rice and Truman are supported by professors and each other. Yet in spite of this support, Rice’s Computer Science department has continued to lose women, not only to non science and engineering disciplines, but to other engineering areas as well, and Truman’s Computer Science department has also continued to lose women to both science and humanities disciplines.

This is clearly not a problem limited to these two institutions. A recent study by the NSF shows an alarming trend. Although the number of science and engineering bachelor degrees earned by female undergraduates has been increasing since the 1960s,

and now women earn roughly half of all science and engineering bachelor degrees, the percentage of Computer Science bachelor degrees earned by females has gone from 37% in 1985 to 28% in 2001. Women in Computer Science have actually lost ground!

What is it that keeps women who are clearly interested in engineering from entering Computer Science? And what can we do to encourage more women to stick with it? The presenters will discuss the specific steps they have taken at their respective institutions to encourage women in Computer Science. These steps include the one-on-one mentoring, group meetings, and community ties of CSters, and the tutoring, field trips, and workshops of TWICS. The discussion will also include an analysis of what has been effective and what has not been. Above all, they want others to share their own experiences. Anita Borg wrote “Increasing women’s impact on IT is not only an issue of equity within a technical field. It is an issue of quality of life for women around the world.” Getting women interested in Computer Science and maintaining that interest are important steps to ensuring that women do have an impact on technology, and that women’s issues will be addressed by technology in the future. Together, we can provide the support women need to succeed in technology.