

ACM-W Chapters: Communities for Students in Computer Science

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Abstract

In Fall 2000, ACM-W, an executive committee of ACM, launched a project to start student chapters of ACM-W in universities. These chapters provide opportunities for students to engage in recruitment and retention activities for women interested in computing. There are currently 13 university chapters and 1 high school chapter within the United States. The momentum of these chapters is growing as they provide important communities within their institutions.

An important responsibility of these chapters is to venture outside their own environment and share their experiences with other institutions in order to disseminate best practices. This panel helps to serve this function. Representatives from four university ACM-W student chapters will describe the activities of their chapter and share their excitement for the changes that they see in their departments as a result of the formation of these communities. Students and faculty alike will benefit from this panel, especially those from institutions that do not currently have any formal student group for women. Each panel member will briefly describe her institution and then identify activities that have worked best for her chapter in order to place activities within the context of an overall institutional environment. A moderated discussion with the panel will follow with sufficient time for questions from the audience.

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1 The Ohio State University

What does chocolate have to do with computing? Ask the members of Ohio State University's (OSU) ACM-W chapter and they'll tell you. Chocolate is absolutely critical to the success of their student organization.

When a small but energetic band of computer science students at OSU started an ACM-W chapter last year, they were determined to make it a different kind of CS club. By focusing on the key principles of diversity and celebration, the ACM-W chapter at OSU has grown swiftly to include more than 80 members: male and female. As one female student remarks, "I think it is WONDERFUL that we have so many guys involved in ACM-W at OSU. One of the best things that we did was attract a very diverse membership body."

Very little about the ACM-W chapter at OSU is formal or traditional. In addition to the officer positions required by the executive committee, we have additional leadership positions for anyone who wants to be in charge of something. We have chocolate, popcorn and Chinese food (as opposed to the usual pizza). Most of our meetings have no formal agenda. Yet, we've managed to host nationally recognized speakers and technical tours, and we even developed a popular semi-annual event we call 'computer jenga' -- to see how much of computer that each player can take away before it stops booting.

Being different has worked for us. Our enthusiasm is infectious, and our success has drawn attention and financial support from the college administration as well as other student groups. More information is available at www.acmw.org.ohio-state.edu.

2 Utah State University

While there are other clubs at Utah State University for computer science types (ACM and the Free Software and Linux Club, FSLC), they tend to be primarily technical in nature. Since its creation four years ago, Utah State's ACM-W student chapter has a different focus to its monthly meetings. Members feel that they have adequate technical stimulation in their courses. ACM-W serves to create an environment where friendships can flourish. Women with different cultural expectations but similar challenges and interests find each other through ACM-W.

Our activities fall into three general categories: skill acquisition, job hunting, and social. Skill acquisition has been addressed via workshops on hardware and webpage creation. Each year we have workshops on resume writing and interviewing skills. Mock interviews (with individuals from industry) have been well received. Women in industry have talked about the challenges and joys of being a woman in a predominantly male field. Social events are popular. We have a pot luck dinner and movie night where we gather at a faculty member's house and share experiences, goals, and culture. Crafts and cooking activities are well received. The strength of the organization is in the web of supporting friendships that have been spun.

The department is extremely supportive, partly due to pressure to increase the number of CS majors. In Utah, the climate of teaching High School computer science as part of vocational technology does little to attract college-bound students, and so, our number of females is below the already depressed national averages. Operating funds for the ACM-W student chapter come from the sale of cables, pop, and books. The ACM-W officers also lobbied for an area where majors could meet, do homework, eat, play games, and relax. The creation of the space, at a time when resources are limited, illustrates the departmental commitment to our students. The break room has been enormously successful. While the personal benefit of the ACM-W chapter to individuals has been impressive, the break room benefits all CS majors.

3 Oakland University

The Oakland University (OU) ACM-W chapter was initiated in the spring of 2003 by students in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering (CSE). The CSE Department is part of the School of Engineering and Computer Science. The school has a number of active student chapters including ACM and SWE (Society of Women Engineers). Most of the students in SWE are Mechanical and Electrical Engineers. Very few Computer Science students participate in SWE. The ACM-W chapter gives these students a natural home.

The main activities sponsored and organized by the ACM-W OU chapter so far centers on a regular Coffee Hour (once to twice a month) with different themes, panels, and speakers. The speakers consist of women professionals in computing from academia and industry, as well as other professional advisors (human resources). Each of these events was attended by 2-3 faculty members from the Department and the School. The presence of the faculty is an important indicator of the support for a burgeoning association. The chapter also meets with the faculty advisor once a semester for a brainstorming lunch to discuss mission, goals, and ideas for the following semester. The chapter is also planning a one week workshop for women entering the university next fall. The workshop will consist of 4-5 mini-projects including the creation of a webpage and the creation of a digital animation.

The OU ACM-W chapter has been seeking collaborations with similar associations in the area. In addition to co-sponsoring events with ACM, SWE, and other student organizations, it has also collaborated with AWC-AA, a chapter of the Association of Women in Computing in a neighboring city by attending their events and inviting members from AWC-AA to speak. A golfing event with women professionals in computing is currently being planned.

The initial set of officers was mostly composed of graduate students. The chapter is currently aggressively seeking to increase the presence of undergraduates. The chapter's url is: www.oakland.edu/org/acm-w/.

4 Stanford University

Student founded in winter of 2002, Stanford Women in Computer Science became an ACM-W chapter the following fall. While Stanford has student chapters of SWE and IEEE, WICS was founded to raise consciousness both within and in the surrounding community about issues faced by women in CS.

While being part of a larger national organization, the autonomy afforded by ACM-W has allowed our chapter to maintain its entrepreneurial spirit of experimenting with many workshops, programs, and discussion groups in order to understand unstated needs in the CS community. The organization is also a touchpoint for department faculty interested in understanding women's perspectives on CS education.

Over the last two years, our chapter has brought role models to the department through our Women in Computer Science lecture series and matched women in mentorship families through our constantly evolving Big Sisters program.