Gender gap growing for women in technology

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Angelina Parker has run her own information technology company for more than 10 years. She took over Compu-Cure, a New Orleans-based IT firm in 2000 and increased its staff from four employees to more than 20.

She said she had to rebuild the business and reintroduce its services to a new set of customers. Beyond those challenges, she found herself at a disadvantage as one of few women in the local IT field at the time.

“It was challenging getting appointments to introduce the company and show them what we did,” Parker said. “I’d walk into conference rooms and find myself being the only woman in the room.”

Although women have made up ground in other professions, the gender gap in the tech industry has widened over the past 30 years.

The number of women earning degrees in computer science has dropped by nearly half, from 14,431 in 1985 to 7,306 in 2010, according to the National Science Foundation.

Women make up about 25 percent of the U.S. computing work force, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Meanwhile, demand for a work force with technical know-how continues to grow, including a new spate of local demand.

In the past two years, large tech companies — including General Electric, Electronic Arts and Game Loft — have set up offices in Louisiana. IBM announced last week that it will open a tech center in Baton Rouge that will specialize in software development and maintenance services. It is expected to create 800 jobs with its partnership with Louisiana State University, which will create an employee feeder program.

The state is investing $14 million over the next 10 years to help universities develop programs that will prepare a skilled work force to meet the needs of tech companies entering the market.

On campus, there is a growing recognition of not just the job opportunities available but the factors that have traditionally steered women away from those jobs.
“I think there’s a big stigma surrounding the pursuit of a job in computer sciences, that it’s too technical and uncreative,” said Jaelle Scheuerman, the Collat Media Lab’s tech liaison at the Newcomb College Institute, part of Tulane University. She is overseeing the newly formed Women in Technology organization at Tulane. The group is focused on pairing women interested in careers related to computer sciences with mentors in the department of science and engineering.

The gender gap in technology begins early, Scheuerman said, as girls aren’t as inclined to play video games or work with computers at an early age.

“There isn’t that early exposure,” she said. “So women aren’t as compelled to consider a career in computer sciences out of high school.”

Olivia Mahler-Haug, a junior at Tulane University, said she did not consider studying computer science until last year because jobs in the field seemed too isolating and technical to be creative. Her opinion changed dramatically when she began working as an intern at the Media Lab. There she learned practical applications for programming and web development in her other fields of study, psychology and international relations.

Mahler-Haug is now president of Tulane’s Women in Technology group.

“There is quite a disparity in the field and there is also a desperate need to fulfill the demand for technical workforce,” she said. “The demand could be filled if the percentage of women in the industry was equal to men.”

Tulane is rebranding its computer science offerings, creating an interdisciplinary program called the coordinate major, to diversify enrollment. The program highlights the practical applications of computer sciences in other fields of study that traditionally attract more women such as the liberal arts.

The idea is that computer science is ubiquitous and can be applied to a broad variety of disciplines, said Carola Wenk, an associate professor in computer science at Tulane.

The university’s computer science program, which was relaunched in July after being eliminated after Hurricane Katrina, is intended to debunk common perceptions of computer science. Wenk hopes it will highlight the use of computer skills in other areas such as music and art.

“We are trying to break away from the stereotype of the ‘tech nerd,’” Wenk said. “It’s a broader effort we are making to attract more women and keep the women-to-men ratio a little more balanced.”

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