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Camp gives girls hands-on experience with technology

By Lauren Leone-Cross
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A University of Illinois Springfield professor hopes she can convince two dozen middle school girls just how fascinating computer science can be.

But here's the catch: She has just two days to make it happen.

At a time when the number of women interested in computer science is declining rapidly, Girl Tech 2013, a two-day camp at UIS that started Thursday, aims to get young girls interested in the field and strengthen their technology skills by giving them hands-on opportunities, said Mary Sheila Tracy, a computer science instructor at the university.

"The key to making this successful is to find something that engages the girl as well as teaches them, and teaching really becomes secondary," Tracy said, adding that the camp, which is in its fifth year, is geared toward girls in middle school, an age when interest begins to decline.

"Girls in middle school make a decision somewhere along the way to walk away from science, technology, engineering and math," Tracy said.

Nationally, just 18 percent of all students who received computer and information sciences undergraduate degrees were female in 2010, compared to 37 percent in 2009, according to data compiled by the National Center for Women & Information Technology.

The number of first-year undergraduate women interested in majoring in computer science fell nearly 80 percent between 2000 and 2011. In 2011, just 25 percent of professional computing occupations were held by women, according to NCWIT.

At UIS, Tracy said 48 of the nearly 300 students in her undergraduate computer science classes this spring were women, when about a decade ago, girls made up about half the roster.

By showing the girls how to use technology in fun ways, Tracy aims to reverse that trend.

No lectures

New to this year's camp is the opportunity for the girls to learn how three-dimensional printers, a hot topic in technology these days, work.

First, the girls use design software to create a virtual image on the computer, and then the printer builds the object by layering very thin material until a 3-D image appears.

By letting them create the image, the girls aren't simply listening to a lecture — they're making it happen themselves, said Lucinda Caughey, a UIS computer science professor teaching the session.

Twelve-year-old Abbie Simpson, who attends New Berlin Junior High School, said she and her two teammates had "a lot of fun" generating heart-shaped objects using the 3-D printing technology.

Abbie, who's been interested in technology for years, said being able to hold a tangible object in her hand that didn't exist just moments before was one of the neatest things she'd ever experienced.

"My mom even didn't know how it worked at all, so she told me, 'When you get there, tell me what a 3-D printer is because I have no clue," Abbie said.

Some of the other highlights from this year's camp include "Geo-caching with iPad," where girls can use software and maps for creating a treasure hunt around campus; and "GreenScreen and Limelight" that allows girls to record short videos and insert themselves into a background anywhere on earth.

In other sessions, girls designed T-shirts using GIMP software, similar to Adobe Photoshop, and explored science in the kitchen while making snacks.

'Cool and fun'

Another New Berlin 12-year-old, Cassie Clair, said she saw a flier for the camp at her school but didn't really know how fun it would be until she arrived.

"Everything just looked really cool and fun, so I just thought it would be a fun thing to do. It's been a lot of fun," Cassie said.

The two-day camp comes to a close today.

"I'm never going to act nationally on this, but I think, 'Hey, maybe I can make a difference locally.' These are two dozen girls who are getting exposed to technology and getting excited about it who didn't before," Tracy said. "If I've got anybody who's listening to me and thinks taking a science class sounds fun, I've won."

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Female tech deficit

Just 48 of the nearly 300 students taking computer science classes at the University of Illinois Springfield this spring were women. About a decade ago, girls made up about half the roster. There's a similar trend at Lincoln Land Community College, where only 12 of the 103 students majoring in computer science this spring were female.

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