

The Mentoring Chain Reaction at Brown University

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Abstract

We present a mentoring model for women in computer science in pursuit of a male-to-female ratio of 50:50. The retention of women in the Brown Computer Science department after the first year is traditionally lower than the co-ed retention. As a result, the Brown Computer Science community has actively supported the involvement of women in its department to encourage first years and to promote current students. Although several mentoring programs currently exist, the recent focus has shifted from launching new programs to integrating them into a rewarding, efficient pyramid model dubbed the Mentoring Chain Reaction (MCR).

We will discuss its implementation, the resulting experiences of both men and women in the department, and the strengths and weaknesses of the program from the perspective of each subgroup. By presenting the effective model of the Women in Computer Science (WiCS) at Brown University, we hope to show how colleagues can develop their own programs for supporting women without alienating the rest of the department.

1 The Pyramid Model

The pyramid model uses the Mentoring Chain Reaction to efficiently use each individual's time and to maximize the cascade of knowledge. The MCR provides a pointer as to whom to turn to first when advising is needed, although it does allow for flexibility.

The line of advising for the MCR follows the downward flow of the pyramid. A member of an upper layer acts as an advisor and mentor for the members of the layer directly beneath her as shown in Figure 1.

2 Summary of Observations

A recent survey of the undergraduate females at Brown University currently enrolled in a computer science course demonstrated the effectiveness of the Mentoring Chain Reaction. Sixty-two percent of the female computer science



Figure 1: The Mentoring Chain Reaction Pyramid.

majors at Brown University were not originally focused on studying computer science. Of the survey respondents, 53% have been involved with the mentoring program; of those women who have participated, 71% of those with mentors found their mentor to be helpful. One mentee stated, "As a freshman/sophomore in the department, I liked how WiCS [Women in Computer Science] allowed me to meet older people (especially women) in the department—women to ask for advice and people just to have fun with . . . I haven't been as active in WiCS as I've wanted to, but I've found these one-on-one conversations enormously helpful and thought-provoking."

The survey uncovered the high percentage of involvement and visibility of women in the department. When looking at the graduating class of 2002, we found 61% percent of women have worked for the department as teaching assistants, technical staff members, or research assistants.

While the Mentoring Chain Reaction is still in its adolescence, we are already pleased with the apparent effect the program is having on the female population of the Brown Computer Science Department. Currently, it is showing its power to retain women, and it seems foreseeable that, as the program becomes more established, it will help draw women to Brown Computer Science.

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