Getting Women Involved

by *Sara Carlstead*

After a not-so-brief hiatus, *Down the Road* is back. In the past, *Down the Road* has highlighted the activities of chapters across the world. There are only so many things chapters do, I've discovered, and finding new and interesting activities has become harder and harder. Because of this, I'm changing the format of *Down the Road* to focus on common problems many chapters face. ``But Sara,'' you ask, ``Will we still get to learn what neat and interesting activities other chapters are doing?'' Indeed you will, readers. From here on out, however, you'll find out what activities chapters use to solve common problems like revitalizing a stagnant chapter, starting a new chapter, and increasing membership. In short, *Down the Road* has gone from a gossip column to an advice column.

The topic for the first of these new columns comes from Crossroads very own Lynellen Perry, who recently queried the ACM Student Chapter mailing list for suggestions on getting more women involved in her ACM chapter at Mississippi State University. The consensus comes back that the problem rests not so much in what chapters are (or aren't) doing, but rather that there aren't a whole lot of women in computer science and related areas to begin with. As Colby O'Donnell from the University of Washington puts it, ``It's hard to sqeeze blood out of a turnip. Likewise, when the CS department has roughly 5-10% women, it's hard to expect more than that percentage to join the ACM.'' In short, if 20% of your club's active participants are women, you are doing better than most.

One of the first things to do is to discover whether your school has an organization for women in computing. Many places do, and partnering with these organizations will give you access to women who are interested in computing. If your school doesn't have

such an organization, it might be worth it for the ACM to sponsor a committee or program on the topic. There are many videos and information available for presentations or activities. (See the sidebar…)

Since there aren't very many women in computer science departments, it makes sense to recruit women from outside of your department. ACM is an equal opportunity organization--anyone with an interest in computers can benefit from membership. Make it clear in your recruiting efforts that you don't have to be in computer science to join the ACM. Sponsor activities that cross the boundaries into other disciplines, especially ones with larger numbers of women. UIUC, for instance, has a special interest group in music that puts on performances of computer generated (or otherwise) music. English or journalism majors with an interest in technical writing or the World Wide Web could get involved with webpage projects and chapter newsletters. Observe who hangs out in the computer labs. These women could also have a use for the ACM. Another way to attract people (including women) to the ACM is to give classes on the basics of the Internet, HTML, or buying a computer. At the end of the class, pitch the ACM as a great organization to learn more about these topics and mention projects that you would be more than willing to have them involved in. Get interested people to sign up for your mailing list. (This way you know who is really interested and you can follow through.)

Another way to get more non-CS majors involved is to sponsor activities with other clubs. MIS clubs often have more women, and are interested in the same areas of corporate information and technical topics as many CS majors. SWE (Society of Women Engineers) is another source of women who might be interested in computers. A past president of the ACM at UIUC jokingly tells about organizing hayrides with SWE. If SWE could get at least 20 members to go, the ACM paid for all of it. If not, SWE members got a discounted rate.

If you are recruiting women in particular, it is important to make sure your club is an appealing place to women. By now most of us know that telling dirty jokes or making sexist comments is inappropriate in most situations, however there are still environmental factors that will discourage women from joining your group. If women are already involved in your group, great. Now make them visible so you can attract other women. It's good if women assume leadership roles in your organization; being an officer or speaking at a meeting is a subtle way to send the message that your club is open to women. If women are present, it's a non-issue. If they aren't, it's really

noticeable and makes many women who might wander into one of your meetings uncomfortable. If you don't have many women in your club, you can still send the same message by having women speakers from industry or your alumni.

It's also useful to examine what your club does. If Doom tournaments and programming contests are the bulk of your activities, expanding your repertoire to topics that are more practical might help attract women. Many chapters sponsor programs on how to get jobs, and one university chapter sponsors a pre-registration party to share advice on what classes to take. Many chapters feel like they get more women interested when the sponsor social activities or co-ed sports teams. Another idea for chapter activities is to do volunteer work. If you visit High Schools to talk to students about computer science, for instance, you might explicitly invite women from your department to come, telling them it's important for girls in High School to see that women are in computer science too.

Getting the first couple of women into your club is difficult. Despite how things ought to be, it is still uncomfortable to be the only woman in a group of men, especially if you don't know anyone. There are a number of ways to combat this. You can speak to women individually to get them to join--a personal invitation will underline the idea that she is really welcome. Even better, convince a group of women to come to your meeting together--you'll get more women, and with a group of people they know are in the same situation they'll be more comfortable and more likely to return. For similar reasons, getting your current members to bring in their friends is a good way to get more women involved. If you have professors talk up the ACM in classes, then more women will feel like it's an appropriate or expected thing for them to do.