

# The MERITs of Computer Science

## Attracting Women to CS Through Mentored Early Research In Teams

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### Summary

The Computer Science Faculty at Grinnell College are attempting to increase the participation of women in the computer science major, including workshop-style introductory courses, a women in computer science lunch group, and an emphasis on many of the other strategies recommended for supporting women in CS. We are also emphasizing mentored early research experiences as a technique for recruiting students. In particular, we invite women students to participate in mentored team research experiences in the summer between their first and second years of college. We call these projects MERITs, for "Mentored Early Research In Teams".

### A Problem

This project addresses a significant problem: the atrociously small numbers of women graduating with undergraduate degrees in computer science. While almost all SMET disciplines have problems attracting and retaining women students, the problem is particularly acute in computer science: Most SMET disciplines have seen increased participation by women over the past decades, the number and percent of women participating in computer science has decreased.

### Some Principles

**Provide mentoring**

E.g., Elaine Seymour

**Emphasize problems of a societal nature**

E.g., NSF STEM guidelines

**Collaborative experiences**

Why?

What can one do?

What does Grinnell do?

How are these normally applied?

### Some Possible Causes

#### Negative Myths

Computer science is a solitary activity  
Computer science and family life don't coexist  
Computer science is just computer programming  
and so on and so forth

#### Lack of Confidence

Women students are rarely confident in their ability to succeed in computer science. There are many possible causes for this lack of confidence, including a related lack of confidence in mathematics, an image of computing as a male activity, ...

### Our Focus: MERITs

Each summer, we invite all women in the introductory CS courses to apply to participate in summer research projects. These projects are done in groups of three or four students and include both the first-year students and upper-level students who serve as both team leaders and as mentors to the first-year students. A faculty member also mentors each group. Students typically work on related projects so that there is interaction both between and within groups.

### Sample Projects

Students work on a variety of projects, most of which emphasize the application of Web technologies, particularly the relationship of those technologies to education. Students have build graphical course web use analyzers, studied data mining of web use data and built tools that permit students to add links and annotations to arbitrary pages.

Can we do more?

### Classroom and Beyond

Workshop-style classes  
Real-world exercises and examples  
Mentoring groups and support teams

Overcoming these problems

Why?

### Changes Desired

#### Dispel Myths

Group projects  
Faculty members demonstrate successful balance  
Students write, analyze implications, study usability, ...  
Projects have social significance

#### Build Confidence

Student research builds confidence [Lopatto & Seymour]  
Students succeed in projects  
Projects build on a variety of strengths  
Ten weeks of full-time work helps students succeed

How?

Results

### Some Failures

Although we've had many successes in the program, we've also had some clear problems. One student did particularly well in summer research and enjoyed it, but did poorly in classwork and did not enjoy it. She's much happier in a new major. Some women feel intimidated by the emphasis on group work and don't apply. Many students get frustrated by the lack of available slots. Male students complain about bias. The institution won't fund as many slots as we'd like.

### A Student Says ...

*The summer research experience has been my most rewarding and encouraging experience in the computer science department. I enjoyed the dynamics within my team, and the supportive atmosphere enabled me to gain confidence at a time when I felt isolated and hindered as a woman, especially in the classroom. Getting hands-on experience in a constructive setting in which I set my own goals from the beginning helped me to broaden my computer skills without the competitive tension that sometimes pervades the classroom. In short, the program gave me something that I struggled to find over three years in the classroom, and that is confidence. I will always be grateful to you for having given me the opportunity to be a part of your research project. It was fun and unexpectedly rewarding.*

A Senior Woman Participant

### Acknowledgements

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### Some Successes

#### More women students

We regularly get three or so women majors each year. However, that's still not enough.

#### Excellent work

Students regularly present their work at refereed and Two student papers have won best-paper awards at large international conferences: 1000+ attendees, 300+ papers.

#### Increased Student Confidence

Reported indirectly in study of Grinnell summer research Students self-report after conference presentations

#### Significant Demand

First year women: 8 applicants, 3 slots  
Other: 18 applicants (5 women), 4 slots