The It Girls Overnight Retreat: An iSchool Recruitment Model for Prospective Female Undergraduate Students

Dori Farah
Syracuse University
School of Information Studies
dfarah@syr.edu

Julie Walas
Syracuse University
School of Information Studies
jlwalas@syr.edu

Abstract

Responding to the well-known need for more women in computing and information science, the Syracuse iSchool offers a powerful and replicable solution: The It Girls Overnight Retreat. This intensive, peer-focused program combines mentoring with a specifically designed curriculum to engage, inspire, and celebrate young women and their potential in the information industry. First piloted in 2011, the iSchool received college applications from 50% of the seniors in attendance and 11 of them became matriculated students. The event model was then enhanced with research-based assessment tools, activities for parents and high school counselors, and the inclusion of barrier-breaking female role models. In Fall 2012, the second-annual event attracted 93 high school juniors and seniors from 43 high schools across 6 states. For the iConference, Syracuse will report on recruitment results, pre- and post-survey data results from the attendees, and best practices for peer institutions with a desire to replicate the event.

Keywords: women in computing, innovation in educational practices, STEM recruitment tools, best practices, female undergraduate recruitment

Introduction

In the United States in 2009, women earned 57% of all undergraduate degrees, but only 18% of all computer and information sciences undergraduate degrees (National Center for Women in Information Technology, 2012). A lack of gender diversity in undergraduate computer and information science programs results in a shortage of female technology talent entering the job market, reduced innovation and competitiveness in the field (Page, 2007), and decreased customer satisfaction with new technologies and products (Catalyst, 2004).

Approach

Our Academic Alliance with the National Center for Women in Information Technology (NCWIT) has provided access to proven practices for recruiting women into information technology (Barker, Cohoon, & Sanders, 2010). We have infused NCWIT's research and best practices into every aspect of The It Girls Overnight Retreat. For example:

Scholarship in Action

Research says that young people express a desire to do something socially relevant and interactive. The It Girls Overnight Retreat includes workshops on the use of technology for social change and culminates with an "Overnight Challenge" – a project completed in small groups of peers and mentors that is focused around the concept of Scholarship in Action, challenging them to create innovative solutions for the world's problems by leveraging technology.

_____

Influencing the Influencers

NCWIT stresses the importance of tailoring your message to the influencers – parents and counselors. The It Girls Overnight Retreat agenda includes parent- and counselor-specific sessions focused on career trajectories in I.T., research-supported best practices for encouraging women in I.T., the college application and financial aid processes, and the flexibility and marketability that an education in computer and information science provides.

Leveraging Assets

Leveraging your assets, such as the University, alumni, community members, and current students is crucial in recruitment. The It Girls Overnight Retreat is strategically timed during a typical high school holiday weekend, Homecoming events with alumni, and a busy University-wide Undergraduate Admissions Visit Day. Because of this, attendees have the opportunity to interact with mentors and role models of all ages and backgrounds, the environment is upbeat and exciting, and stay overnight in the residence halls with current female iSchool students.

Results

In total, 43 of the 93 attendees of the 2012 It Girls Overnight Retreat completed the pre- and post-event surveys. The following descriptive statistics are based on survey data from those 43 participants:

- 85% indicated that the retreat greatly increased their awareness of women in technology.
- 30% indicated that they found technology more interesting than they did prior to the retreat.
- Prior to the retreat, 63% of participants indicated that they would not consider a career in technology. Of these 63% of participants, 41% indicated that they would consider a career in technology after attending the retreat.
- Prior to the retreat, 28% of the respondents indicated that it was highly likely they would obtain a career in technology. After the retreat, 52% of respondents indicated that it was highly likely they would obtain a career in technology.
- Prior to the retreat, 37% of respondents indicated that they planned to apply to the iSchool. After the retreat, 49% indicated that they planned to apply to the iSchool.

Conclusion

The event was deemed a success for the Syracuse iSchool in 2011, so we are repeating the event in November 2012. We are currently working to improve the event model for dissemination and will be implementing researched-based surveys to properly assess the event model and support our findings. At the 2013 iConference, we anticipate reporting the following discoveries from the pre- and post-event data collected from attendees: a positive change in their interest in I.T. as an educational focus and career; an increased confidence in their own technical abilities; a heightened capacity to visualize a future career for themselves in I.T.; and a stronger desire to study in a technical program and pursue a technical career.

Implications

The It Girls Overnight Retreat brought positive recruitment results to the Syracuse iSchool, but its impact could be more significantly realized if replicated at other iSchools. We are excited about the positive growth in gender diversity this event could bring to our iSchool community and the difference it could make in our world.

References

Barker, L., Cohoon, J. M., & Sanders, L. (2010). Strategy Trumps Money: Recruiting Undergraduate Women Into Computing. *IEEE Computer Magazine.* 43(6), 82-85. Retrieved from http://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/ieee_strategytrumpsmoney.pdf

Catalyst (2004). *The Bottom line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity.* New York: Catalyst.

National Center for Women in Information Technology (2012, December 12). *NCWIT Scorecard: a report on the status of women in information technology.* Retrieved from http://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/scorecard2010_printversion_web.pdf

Page, S.E. (2007). *The Difference: How the power of diversity helps create better groups, firms, schools, and societies.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.