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Cal Poly Joins a National Program to Increase Women in Computing and Technology

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Cal Poly is among the participants in a two-year program being launched by the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) that seeks to radically increase the number of women in technology and computing. The 20 universities and 14 companies participating include startups and global corporations, public and private universities, and state government departments.

Through Pacesetters, senior leaders from companies and universities publicly commit to increasing the number of women in the U.S. computing and technology workforce. Participants use innovative recruitment and retention methods to tap new talent pools and introduce interventions for those at risk of leaving, with the goal of bringing significant "net new" women to their organizations. The program is sponsored by the National Science Foundation, Google, and Qualcomm.

According to NCWIT, women currently hold only 25 percent of all computing-related occupations in the U.S. and comprise just 18 percent of all computing and information sciences degrees earned at U.S. institutions. Additionally, research has found that women's increased participation has been tied to higher profits, better return on investment, and more innovative teams.

Involvement in Pacesetters is only one of several initiatives undertaken by the Cal Poly Computer Science and Software Engineering Department (CSC/SE) to support and encourage female students in computing fields.

For three years, the department has undertaken a fundraising campaign to send female students to the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing (GHC) conference. The world's largest gathering of women in computing, the conference is designed to bring the research and career interests of women in computing to the forefront. In 2012, 17 Cal Poly students received grants for airfare, registration and hotel accommodations to attend the event held in Baltimore, making them the largest cohort of students from a public university.

"Our students who have attended the Grace Hopper Conference call the experience 'life changing,'" noted Ignatios Vakalis, CSC/SE chair. "In addition, this fall, we established a second mentoring program for women. With the help of our Industry Advisory Board chair, Kari Freedman, we initiated a mentoring program that pairs our female majors with industry professionals. This supplements the existing mentoring process, which matches upper class female students with incoming female freshmen."

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