Computer Fear

To avoid repeating mistakes of past decades, we need to recognize affirmative action implications of the computer bandwagon.

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The fourth period bell rings, signaling the start of class. The high school computer lab quickly fills with several dozen students, mostly male. Three girls, looking somewhat adrift in this sea of boys, take their seats male. Three girls, looking somewhat

The ratio of male to female enrollment was approximately 5:3 (11,441 males to 6,843 females). Enrollment in computer science courses at the University of California, Berkeley, is also heavily male-dominated beyond the introductory courses, only 25 percent of computer science majors at Berkeley are females.

Ensuring Equity
A district implementing or revising a computer education program should take a strong position on sex equity at the onset. Once this position has been clearly stated, program implementation must be shaped accordingly. Among other things, schools need to gather their own data to assess how significantly they are meeting their sex equity goals. Participation in advanced computer programming courses at a high school level should be monitored annually. If this data provides evidence of male dominance, the investigation should probe the foundations of the program. If the district provides substantial computer literacy experiences at the middle or junior high level, for example, and all subsequent computer courses are elective, a sample of incoming high school students should be interviewed to determine why students may be dropping out of computer courses. The inquiry might begin even earlier during the computer literacy courses themselves.

The results of a study conducted at Princeton High School showed that gender, grade, and the type and section of math class were all related to how much students learned. Males, younger students, students in sophomore and junior precollege math, and students in advanced math courses gained relatively more than females, seniors, and students enrolled in other math courses and levels. In general, access to and experience with computers were unrelated to gain in computer literacy. However, asking for help from the teacher benefited female students, and access to a computer outside of school affected the scores of ninth- and tenth-grade female students.

Those of us who are responsible for implementing computer programs must be conscious of the affirmative action implications of such programs. The social consequences of preparing a tiny male technological elite to provide leadership are ominous and foreboding.

Now that we have passed through the initial states of computer enthusiasm, serious issues need to be addressed.  


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