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Computer camp draws students from coast to coast

High school students experience student life during Computing Insights program

Jul 26/06

by Michelle MacArthur

Thirty high school students are being given a sneak peek of university life this month, complete with lectures, lab work and even a stay in residence.

The students are on campus for computer science's three-week Computing Insights summer program, which gives students entering their final year of high school the opportunity to explore the field of computer science.

"Computing Insights really is about giving kids who are really already interested in computer science a chance to do stuff that they would probably never have a chance to do in high school, or on their own, by putting them in touch with top researchers and academics in computer science ... and at the same time, showing them what computer science really is," said Diane Horton, associate chair of undergraduate studies and a senior lecturer in the Department of Computer Science.

Computing Insights also helps debunk myths about the field, which is often misinterpreted as anti-social and uncreative, Horton added.

Tobi Kral, the camp's co-ordinator, agreed. "A lot of students come out of high school with the idea that computer science is about sitting in front of a computer and typing and they don't often see the impact that the programming can have on the things around them and they don't often see the more social side," Kral said. "Because there are definitely career opportunities out there that are more of the social interaction than technical work."

Computing Insights features daily lectures given by faculty and industry guests on topics as diverse as artificial intelligence, human-computer interaction and animation. After the morning lecture, students spend the afternoon working on related labs and developing their programming skills under the tutelage of graduate students in the field.

The diversity of topics covered also helps students, many of whom will be applying to university in the fall, explore the

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field and gage their interests. "The thing is, I'm not quite sure what I want to do in the future. I'm kind of considering two different options, chemical engineering or computer science, right now . My teacher suggested I try out this camp to see the different aspects of computer science and maybe I'll end-up choosing computer science as my major for university," said Annie Kuang, a Grade 12 student from Toronto.

While the camp attracts the majority of its students from the Greater Toronto Area, some come from across the country and, this year, from as far as Taiwan to attend. Campers can stay in rooms at Innis College under the supervision of undergraduate computer science students, an option introduced last year.

Michael Baglole, a Grade 12 student from Prince Edward Island who enrolled in Computing Insights to help him make decisions about university, said staying on campus has given him a sense of student life at U of T. "It's cool staying on campus, especially because everyone's from all over: one's from Taiwan, two are from B.C., a few are from the Ontario area but aren't originally from Canada, so you get to meet new people and the cool thing is, the campus is awesome."

And while Computing Insights is not intended as a recruitment effort, students who attend the program are exploring U of T as a result. "The biggest thing was to stay in Toronto for three weeks, on the campus, so if I like it, I'll pretty much come to U of T, which is actually a great opportunity and computer science is just always an option. It's pretty fun too," Baglole said.

In fact, the camp is so much fun that teachers want to come too; in response to demand from high school teachers, Computing Insights for Teachers was created five years ago. The week-long program takes place in August and focuses on updating and upgrading teachers' skills in the rapidly changing discipline.

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