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Tech bytes

By Ross Daly

Friday, April 27, 2007

Business, education leaders form tech-ed strategy

Business leaders, high school teachers and university representatives gathered Monday at Stony Brook University to combat declining enrollment in computer science and related technology programs.

The room inside the Heavy Engineering Building was stifling hot – air conditioners won't be turned on for several weeks yet, according to university officials – but the heat didn't stifle the discussion. Ideas were batted around and committees were formed, all designed to reach out to Long Island high schools and encourage students to pursue technology careers.

One side effect of declining university enrollment in these programs is that U.S.

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companies will be unable to fill the additional 300,000 information technology jobs expected by 2010 with American workers, according to Satya Sharma, executive director of Stony Brook's Center of Excellence in Wireless and Information Technology. This is leading to a dramatic influx of techies from abroad; over one day earlier this month, visa applications from skilled foreign workers – the H-1B visa – were more than double the number the government grants for the entire year, Sharma said. (The

government received 150,000 applications; the current cap is 65,000 annually.)

To counteract these trends, the group gathered at Stony Brook – the Outreach Program for Long Island Technology Education – wants to get to kids while they're young and still making decisions about education and careers.

"How do we target our volunteer efforts to go after them?" asked Judy Murrah, vice president for information technology at Motorola's Enterprise Mobility business.

Murrah is the co-chairwoman of the outreach group with CEWIT's director of industrial outreach, Scott Passeser.

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"I was very pleasantly surprised and pleased at the attendance, the energy level and also the variety of people that were there," Murrah said.

At Monday's meeting, Murrah outlined a number of initiatives the group will explore, including going into schools with demonstrations that offer kids hands-on technology experiences. "We made a decision to take broad technology focus, because technology right now permeates everything we do in our jobs," she said. "We also decided to focus on ways to bring technology to the students."

The program will also look to sponsor field trips to CEWIT and its research and development labs; sponsor discussion groups with professionals who can serve as role models; and stage technology career fairs and engineering competitions. The outreach program will begin by targeting high school students and consider expanding to lower grades later, participants said.

Ninth grade is a good time to start attracting students to technology fields because that's when they start making choices that affect the evolution of their course selections, said Mary Pat Grafstein, coordinator of the School/Industry Partnership for the Smithtown Central School District. Grafstein and other secondary educators at the meeting welcomed the support of industry.

"I thought that it was a great start to all of the wonderful things I hope we can set up for our students," she said. "I was impressed that so many businesses were there and are interested in coming into our schools."

Grafstein is one of several volunteers looking to develop tech programs and competitions. On Tuesday, she asked a student who is graduating from Smithtown High School East and will study computer science to join the committee.

"He'd be a good person to tell us what got him interested in it," Grafstein said.

Organizers said they would take the rest of the spring and summer to develop programs and conduct outreach efforts, and hope to roll out programs in the next school year.

Murrah said the group is fortunate to have CEWIT as a catalyst for its efforts – especially since encouraging students to pursue technology careers is so vital for Long Island's future economy.

"It provides a tangible critical mass," she said. "It's critical for us to have a local pipeline of technology talent for us to grow our companies here. We need something to rally around."



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