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**W**omen in computer science are like “canaries in a coal mine” according to Lenore Blum, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her remarks, made in a talk at Harvard University and reported in *The New York Times* (17 April), were highlighting the fact that the number of women graduating in computer science in the United States is falling. Figures from the National Science Foundation say that 38% of computer-science graduates were women in 1985, but in 2003 women accounted for only 28%. Blum believes that this tailing off is the beginning of something more serious — she fears that the factors encouraging women to quit the field will soon be leading their male counterparts away too.

Some of those factors are actually misconceptions about the state of the job market. It is commonly thought that the dotcom bust and the trend for outsourcing information-technology jobs to cheaper labour markets in countries such as India, are restricting opportunities. But, in fact, government reports and industry experts expect demand for computer scientists to increase. Nevertheless, the decline in the number of women active in the field is worrying — and seems to stretch beyond academia. A Correspondence to *Nature* last year pointed out that none of the 41 authors of *Towards 2020 Science* — a report from Microsoft that examined how to integrate computing into the sciences — was female (M. E. Pollack *Nature* **441**, 25; 2006).

Blum suggests that switching the course emphasis away from programming efficiency to problem-solving and software design might resolve these issues. That approach has certainly worked at Carnegie Mellon, where the revamped curriculum has seen the intake of women students for computer science rise from 8% to nearly 40%. Another idea might be to emphasize that computer skills are essential to many disciplines, such as materials science, astronomy and bioinformatics. Having a hearty background in IT can help both men and women excel, not just in computer science, but across all scientific disciplines.

**Paul Smaglik, *Naturejobs* editor**

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