

Women in IT, Jan. 29, 2016

Opening Remarks

Dr. Larisa Preiser-Houy

Interim Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Programs, Cal Poly Pomona

As an Interim Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Programs, and a former Associate Dean and Professor of Computer Information Systems, I am honored and privileged to share a few opening remarks with you as we commence today's conference with the theme of Women in IT. Welcome everyone!

In my triple roles of a Cal Poly Pomona administrator and teacher-scholar, as well as the information technologies industry veteran that also happens to be a woman, I THANK YOU, for taking an interest in a topic near and dear to me.

I'm going to start today with something completely unrelated to computers, Internet, or communication technologies: I will start with the topic of ART.

Probably the most popular historical period of art is the Renaissance Era. People line up daily to see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and it has hardly changed in 500 years. David, Mona Lisa, are two of many masterpieces that have stood the test of time.

Think of all the great Renaissance artists... Michelangelo... Leonardo... There are several figures that stood out in the period.

Can anybody name a *female* artist from the same era... and before you pull out your phones to look this information up, that was a rhetorical question. They existed, they were just very few and far between.

Simply put: It was art's most prolific period and women were essentially not invited to participate because of gender bias on what a woman's role should be.

We're living in the infancy of an era that will be known as the Information Age. When future generations look back at our body of work, computers will be our canvasses and our brushstrokes made by programming code.

Computers have changed the way humans live. We're communicating in entirely new ways and have access to amazing amounts of data – literally more knowledge in our pockets than any humans before us and it's not even close.

If the history books had to be written tomorrow, Steve Jobs would probably have a spot. Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, also.

If the history books had to be written tomorrow, how many of them would be dedicated to the gender that comprises 58-percent of the population?

Things started out great for us. Ada Lovelace became what most consider the world's first computer programmer in 1842.

In 1985, 35 percent of computer science grads were female. Today it's about half that.

The United States Department of Labor says in 2014, of the country's corporate information officers only 6 percent were women.

Really think about it; going off that statistic, 17 CIOs would have to meet in a room before one woman was allowed to enter.

If we were playing football, at least *American* football, it might make sense. A 300-pound man holds certain advantages over the average female in physical contests.

But a computer does not care if you are male or female. They do not discriminate based on gender. Women have no physical or mental barriers preventing them from pursuing a career in IT.

Burning Glass Technologies Labor insights says more than 500,000 IT jobs were available in the U.S. during the last quarter of 2013... so there is opportunity now.

Code.org expects computing jobs to more than double by 2020 meaning there is a future as well.

There is not only a surplus of jobs, last year a Michigan State University study showed three of the top five starting salaries for college grads involved computers or programming.

If the money is good and employment is readily available, where are the women?

I grew up in the Soviet Union. Computers were the farthest thing from my mind when I came to the US in my teenage years. I remember struggling to learn the English language and carrying two dictionaries with me wherever I went. But, as an undergrad, I came to Cal Poly because of its polytechnic, learn by doing education.

I was lucky – when I was searching for majors, the advisors recommended CIS because of its model curriculum and jobs. I fell in love with the socio-technical aspects of computing. Out of college, I developed software for Hughes Aircraft, Aerojet, and Ranibird, and immediately enjoyed the social aspect of providing technical consultations to end-users.

Without that encouragement, my career would have gone in a much different direction. It's one of the main reasons I'm so adamant about directing young minds, male or female, toward such a promising career path.

If there's one thing you take from today, please let it be encourage others. There is not a person in this room that knew how to code the first time he or she turned on a computer. We all owned blank slates at some point.

A 2008 Harvard Business Review study found as many as 50 percent of women working in STEM fields leave over time due to hostile work environments. Do not let that support stop after college either.

Men, I encourage you to take action too. It's impossible to assemble the greatest pool of talent if you only consider 42 percent of the population. There's incentive for everyone.

Change is not instant. For the students here, you won't go to class next year and suddenly have a 50/50 gender split. Professional women aren't going to be treated as equals in the workplace next week. But events like this can be a catalyst to change

IT is truly a great career. Every famous designer label needs a website, payroll software, etc. The same goes for sports teams and concert halls.

If you're a humanitarian, the appeal to a career in IT could be developing an algorithm capable of detecting diseases earlier. There really is a path for all passions.

Today, take advantage of having access to women that have succeeded. Learn from their experiences and pass on the knowledge and excitement to others. Thank you.