

Teen Girls Discover Digital Technology as ‘COMPUGIRLS’

by Valerie Menand

Dr. Kimberly Scott, an associate professor in women and gender studies at Arizona State University, the digital divide is not just about “who has access to computers, but what happens during that access.”

Scott is the principal investigator and creator of a National Science Foundation-funded project called COMPUGIRLS, an innovative technology program designed to teach girls of color how to use technology to bring about social change.

“I was concerned with the low participation of young women from higher needs school districts in science, technology, engineering and math,” says Scott. “Excluded from the fastest growing technological fields, their economic prospects were grim; yet I knew the interest in technology was there. As a teacher, it’s important to empower my students and provide them the skills that will expand their opportunities.”

It was Scott’s own desire to make a difference that put her on the journey to ASU and COMPUGIRLS. The art history and French literature graduate from Smith College taught fourth grade in New Jersey, but was “appalled at how poorly the teachers treated the students.” Hoping to effect change, she returned to school, earning a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction/elementary education from Long Island University and a doctorate in education from Rutgers.

Scott developed COMPUGIRLS from a program she initiated at Hofstra University in New York. Targeting 13- to 18-year-old girls from under-resourced school districts in the Phoenix area, COMPUGIRLS combines digital technology training with social activism. Funded in part by a three-year, \$853,000 grant from the NSF, it requires participants to attend mentor-led classes after school and in the summer. The girls choose a topic to study and then construct research around it, including a research paper and video documentaries. They even constructed virtual buildings via Second Life to help visualize solutions.

“Our intention is to close the gap, not only between girls and technology but between learning these skills and adapting them to real life, so that they become technologists,” Scott says.

So far, the junior technologists have investigated an array of community or social issues, including Arizona SB 1070, the controversial state law that grants local police the authority to check the immigration status of people they stop. The girls also have examined the ongoing conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan and the prevalence of multiple myeloma in American Indian communities. “The girls tend to believe that the best solution is providing more balanced information about a topic,” Scott says. Besides the NSF, Scott also receives funding from the Arizona Community Foundation.

“I consider COMPUGIRLS a ‘three-fer’ — it targets young women, fits our educational criteria and addresses the low participation of girls in STEM,” says Michael Kelly, a trustee at the fund. “It benefits the community by making its participants hungry for education, which makes them, ultimately, more employable.”

Since its inception in 2007, the program has served 200 girls — 70 percent Latina, 15 percent African-American and 15 percent American Indian.

The mother of a young daughter, Scott says she remains buoyed by the occasional testimonials of past participants. “One graduate of the program went on to graduate from high school and find work with a community group. She was

promoted to the head of technology, which left her a little intimidated. But she told me that because of COMPUGIRLS she knew that even if she was unsure of the technology, she knew she could figure it out.”

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