Less demand for computer courses

OTTAWA (CUP) — Demand for computer science courses has dropped at universities across the country, to the relief of professors and administrators.

Fewer students are applying for computer science, once the hottest discipline on many campuses. According to administrators, the drop in demand has eased problems such as crowding, overworked staff, and limited equipment and resources.

"We have been on an exponential growth wagon for a long time," said Lee White, chair of the computing science department of the University of Alberta in Edmonton. With enrollment down about eight per cent, the department can now adequately accommodate its students, he said.

"Finally, there isn't a frantic feeling," said White, adding he and other administrators can now plan more effectively. "Because it is more predictable, we are able to conduct ourselves as a respectable department."

At the University of Waterloo, undergraduate advisor Rosemary Walker said, "there's more of a sense that supply and demand are coming into tune with one another."

Walker said interest in computer science is still high. "Before they were beating our doors down, but it's more reasonable now," he said.

At both Waterloo and Alberta, there are more spots available than students. U of A instituted a tougher grade for qualifying students, although Waterloo lowered its standard and is still incurring an enrollment drop.

Walker said some students who might have enrolled in computer science entered related programs, including computer engineering.

Mike Shepherd, computing science director at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said about 15 per cent fewer students enrolled this year. He said computer science does not offer the allure it had five years ago.

"A degree in computer science is no longer a meal ticket," he said. "There are still positions available, but not as many as there were before.

"As well, the previous crowding of courses may have turned some students away," he said.

James Varah, chair of the computer science department at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, said more students are enrolling for senior and graduate level courses.

"A good example on the graduate level is an artificial intelligence course," Varah said. "Normally, it has 10 to 15 students. It has over 30 this year, and about 10 of those 30 are from outside computer science."

Among those who study computer science as a secondary program are majors in applied science, commerce, and the liberal arts, who use computing as a tool in their primary work.

Administrators say the decline in enrollment is allowing educational quality to improve. And interest in qualified graduates has not diminished, says Pat Brand, manager of UBC's Canada Employment Centre.

"If you look at applied science and science, computer science did better than any of the other options," said Brand.

Companies most interested in computer science graduates are petroleum and communications firms, Brand said.

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