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LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

LSU Provides Computer Programming Workshops to Middle School Students

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In a state where learning a programming language is not required to earn a high school diploma, Louisiana State University's Center for Computation and Technology is creating resources for middle school students to learn about the relationship between math and computers.

"Most kids see computers as important to their own entertainment, but it is better to learn about real world applications," said student Maya Cook, 13, of Baton Rouge. Cook said her school does not have a "hardcore" class and when students are introduced to computers it is "just about Microsoft and Powerpoint and stuff."

Attendees also described differences between the teaching methods between this class and what occurs at their schools.

Anusha Zaman,13, Baton Rouge, said the workshop was tailored toward students individually, while teachers at her school often hand out materials and leave students to sort it out single handedly. This frustrates students attempting to work together, she said, since they are not usually permitted to talk to one another in class.

LSU Associate Professor of Physics Juana Moreno, of the CCT faculty, noted that through the use of the programming language, Haskell students can learn a new approach to concepts like unit conversions.

Moreno helped organized the workshop, alongside Baton Rouge Community College Computer Science Instructor Fernando Alegre, who describes the use of Haskell as a "creative" way to refresh and retain mathematical concepts by giving students more ownership of those concepts.

"The schools focus on [standardized] test-taking. The curriculum is so large, the (teachers) can't re-cover the same materials."

This makes grade school math curriculums rigid and fixed, Alegre said, causing students to have problems recalling elementary concepts such as dividing whole numbers and fractions.

Moreno said with large, national companies moving into the state, such as IBM and EA,it is odd that high school graduates are not required to take a computer science course that teaches programming.

"It looks like it's going backwards," he said.

"We are here to at least let people know that this choice exists," Alegre said. "It is not a replacement [for other ways of teaching math]. It is a complement."

The four fall workshops are open to any Louisiana student in the seventh or eighth grade, but currently are full through December's final class.

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