The “collision”: Our fault or “no fault”?

To the editor:

Right off the bat, let me make it clear that I sympathize with the plight of computer science departments to “produce” (the authors’ term) enough graduates and doctors for the rising demand (“Imbalance Between Growth and Funding in Academic Computer Science: Two Trends Colliding,” September Computer, pp. 70-74). However, the thought apparently never crossed the authors’ minds that the “product” may be defective.

In the age of Gramm-Rudmann, any support for CS education will have to come from the industry that needs the graduates. If the decision makers in that industry regard the CS curriculum as inadequate, or even irrelevant, they will not open their purse strings. As an editor and technical writer for a large trade magazine, I have been talking to many of these managers over the last 10 years. Some, in fact, regard a CS education as detrimental to their needs.

Only partly can such an attitude be explained by the fact that few of today’s decision makers had any formal CS education themselves. More to the point is the perception that there really is no such thing as computer science, that students are consequently burdened with esoteric mathematical concepts, and that they learn nothing about the principles of design. (Because mathematicians don’t construct things, while engineers do, CS departments with EE roots obviously suffer less from this last deficiency.)

CS faculties, and indeed the leadership of our Computer Society, should search their souls for solutions to the dilemma—whether perceived or real. One observation should give us informatics folk pause, though: Industry appears anxious to soak up BSEE novices. Most ads for software people, on the other hand, stipulate “experience required.” Even some of our most reputable CS schools have indeed not been able to place their limited “merchandise.”

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