The Gender Gap

I was truly happy to see an article by Robert Glass in the Sounding Board column (“The Gender Gap: Is It a Computing Problem or Simply a Computer Science Problem?”) in the March/April 2012 issue of IEEE Software. I am always delighted to see what Robert Glass is thinking, and in this case serendipity was involved!

I had just finished reading an article in Science that also covered the gender gap (M.C. Villeval, “Ready, Steady, Compete,” 3 Feb., 2012). In fact, two other articles in the magazine addressed this same issue (L. Balafoutas and M. Sutter, “Affirmative Action Policies Promote Women and Do Not Harm Efficiency in the Laboratory,” and L. Beaman et al., “Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India”).

As a member of the poorly represented gender, I have a long-time interest in this subject. What’s unique in the Science articles is a new dimension—compared with men, women tend to have different attitudes toward competition. The research described in these articles shows that the “competitiveness gap” might explain why women are underrepresented in many fields, not just IT or computer science.

The articles present one possible solution—a form of affirmative action that reduces the competitiveness gap without affecting men’s choices or performance. In this research, high-ability women are motivated to enter the competition.

I’m not an expert in this research, but it shows the current situation in a new light and that’s always interesting.

Thanks to Bob for the article and for calling attention to an intriguing problem in our discipline.

Linda Rising

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