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Title: IN MY OPINION - GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS Filling the gender gap
n the tech work force
Author: Cynthia Crose
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America is seeing its global competitive edge in science and engineering slip, and that's as true for our state as it is for the rest of the nation. Europe graduates three times as many engineering students as the United States; Asia, five times as many. With increasing competition from overseas, Oregon must look to a talent pool that hasn't begun to be fully tapped: women. Encouraging women into engineering careers is one way to improve our global competitiveness in science and technology.

But that has been quite a challenge to date. Women make up half of the country's overall work force with college degrees. Yet they represent fewer than 10 percent of the engineers. That holds for Oregon as well. A recent American Community Survey shows that 18,188 men are employed in Oregon as engineers, while only 2,104 women are pursuing engineering careers here.

The last U.S. Census showed same disparity in numbers for every engineering discipline in Oregon. For example, there were 3,443 male civil engineers compared to 414 women in that field.

Those numbers aren't surprising to local engineering schools. At the Oregon Institute of Technology, its engineering departments are asking, "Where are they?" That was the title of a 2001 report they published detailing a concerted effort to recruit and keep female students in their classrooms. With female enrollment so low, OIT has organized special outreach programs and forums. The goal is to ultimately benefit from a more diverse student body.

That diversity can be achieved, but only if a focus on science, technology and math education begins early. A recent survey by the Society of Women Engineers found that while 95 percent of girls surveyed say science careers are "cool," 66 percent said those same careers aren't for them --most of them preferred careers in entertainment or fashion.

That can change. Mentoring is the key. It is about piquing the girls' interest in science and engineering and then keeping that interest alive. A mentor encourages positive choices by supporting academic achievement and introducing the benefits of becoming an engineer or scientist.

In Oregon, several programs are geared to provide this focused mentoring. We have the Saturday Academy's Advocates for Women in

Science, Engineering and Mathematics (www.saturdayacademy.org). Since 1994 it has inspired middle school to high school girls to pursue science, engineering and math careers through hands-on activities and site visits to businesses around the state. Another is the summer camp EX.I.T.E. --Exploring Interests in Technology and Engineering. Its goal is to get seventh- and eighth-grade girls interested in math and science through fun and innovative projects.

Saturday Academy and EX.I.T.E. camp are just two local programs that are great examples of what works. They provide a vehicle for local companies, government agencies and university scholars to reach hundreds of new young women who have the potential. All they need is encouragement and guidance.

In a competitive global business environment, success depends on the creativity and the innovation of individuals working together on solving problems. When it comes to diversity in thought, women are necessary to make a difference. Women add new perspectives and different approaches to teamwork. Women must also play a part in addressing the shrinking American engineering work force. Tomorrow's innovations and inventions depend on them.

It is up to us in Oregon --men and women --to continue encouraging young women to consider such a challenging and rewarding career field.

Cynthia Crose is vice president of learning for IBM Global Technology.

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