

UVA Professor Receives National Teaching Award in Computer Science



Smart homes and smart phones are taking center stage in Computer Science, but Professor Mary Lou Soffa hopes that the next big trend in her field will be even more smart women. There is currently a shortage of women in Computer Science, and Soffa is working hard to change that. She was recently recognized with the prestigious ACM SIGSOFT Influential Educator Award for teaching and mentoring.

A female pioneer in the field of computer science, Soffa has mentored dozens of women to become computer scientists through teaching, personal

relationships and professional organizations. Women account for only 18 percent of all undergraduate computer and information science degrees, according to the National Center for Women and Information Technology.

“We need women’s perspectives.

We need the people who are using this technology to help design and create it.”

- Mary Lou Soffa

Lingjia Tang earned her PhD under Soffa at UVA. She is now a University of Michigan Computer Science and Engineering professor. Tang says Soffa believed in her when others did not. “She had a lot of faith in me. Without her I would not have my PhD and my position as a professor,” Tang says.

Computer Science is an excellent career choice for women, Soffa says. “Women love it. These jobs are intellectually stimulating, exciting and creative. The salaries are excellent. It’s a strong and stable career,” she says.

Soffa sat at the helm of the Computer Science Department at UVA for eight years, serving as chair from 2004 to 2012. She is currently the Owen R. Cheatham Professor of Sciences in Computer Science.

Soffa chose Computer Science in her 20s because she wanted to make an impact on people’s lives. A warm, friendly and stylish woman, she is anything but the stereotypical computer geek. She is the perfect role model to help young women succeed in the field. Soffa has mentored women of all ages – from high school students to undergraduate and graduate students. She has graduated more than 30 PhD students and half of them were women. Nationally, only 19 percent of PhD students in Computer Science are female, according to the Computer Research Association.

Soffa has received numerous prestigious national awards for her work in computing as well as educating students. She also co-founded a local Virginia/DC affiliate of the National Center for Women in Technology.

Her own research focuses on the development, performance and security of software applications.

Industry experts want to see more women in Computer Science just as Soffa does. “This is something that Google and other companies want. They see the importance and they want more women in the field.”

Soffa spent her childhood on the eastern shore of Maryland. From a humble upbringing on a farm, she has diligently earned herself a place as one of the most respected women in her field. She has a master's degree in Mathematics and a PhD in Computer Science.

"Mentoring is not something we had when I was in high school," she says. "These relationships are so important. When I look back at the work I have done over the span of my career, it's not the papers I have written that matter the most. It's the students I have mentored."

She recalls assisting a young woman early in her teaching career who timidly came into Soffa's office barely able to produce a knock that got her noticed. Just two years later under Soffa's influence, the young woman became a confident professional who landed a job and was ready to take on the world. After seeing her student transform, Soffa says she realized, "This is what it's all about," she says.

By, Jenny Clark