

CRA-W Grad Cohort

Guiding Female Graduate Students Towards Success

DILMA DA SILVA



Dilma Da Silva is professor and department head of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at Texas A&M University. She is also director for the Computer Science and Engineering Division of the Texas A&M Engineering Experiment Station (TEES). She previously worked at Qualcomm Research in California, IBM Research in New York, and University of Sao Paulo in Brazil. She received her PhD from Georgia Tech in 1997. She has published more than 80 technical papers and filed 14 patents. Dilma is an ACM Distinguished Scientist, an ACM Distinguished Speaker, a member of the board of CRA-W and CDC, co-founder of Latinas in Computing, and treasurer for ACM SIGOPS.

dilmamds@gmail.com

Presented by



I enjoy attending conferences such as OSDI, USENIX ATC, VEE, and SOSOP because I get exposed to exciting technical ideas as I discuss great research results with colleagues whom I cherish. But, by far, my favorite event is the annual CRA-W Grad Cohort Workshop.

Grad Cohort is a two-day workshop where 300+ female graduate students interact with 25+ senior women in computing research. Grad Cohort accepts students in their first, second, or third year of graduate school in computer science or engineering. Senior women come from academia, industry research, and national labs, covering a diverse set of computing disciplines; in 2014, three of them were active members of the USENIX community.

The program includes a mix of formal presentations and informal discussions and social events. Some presentations cover mentoring advice such as how to become more effective in professional networking, improve communication skills, and balance graduate school and personal life. These are traditional mentoring topics, but at Grad Cohort they come alive as presenters include more personal information and insights about their experiences in handling the specific opportunities and challenges they faced in their research careers. Every year that I attended such sessions, I planned to half-listen to them as I tackled work on my laptop, but I found myself mesmerized by the relevant and fresh perspectives being presented.

The program also includes information on graduate school survival skills, organized in parallel tracks targeting first year, second year, and third year students. Sessions include: master's versus PhD programs; strategies for finding an advisor, research topic, and financial support; thesis proposal preparation; dissemination of research results; internships; and job search and interview tips for academic and industry jobs. Panels covering topics such as building self-confidence and a professional persona are very popular with attendees. The program ends with direct feedback sessions, such as a resume writing clinic and individual advising. You can find the slides from presentations for the 11 editions of the event at cra-w.org/gradcohort.

Beyond the strength of the program, Grad Cohort is special to me because of the unique atmosphere emanating from a group of 300+ women discussing their experiences as graduate students in computer science. Attendees have commented that the welcoming and supportive environment in the workshop leaves them feeling more empowered to handle challenges back in school and eager to deploy what they learned in the workshop to make the best out of the opportunities they have. And, yes, after dinner on Friday evening, we dance our hearts out.

CRA-W carries out extensive data collection and analysis to demonstrate that Grad Cohort is effective in improving the success and retention of women in computing research. Information on how the 2014 edition of the workshop impacted attendees is available on the evaluation report [1]. Another report [2] from the CRA Center for Evaluating the Research Pipeline contrasts data from Grad Cohort participants and non-participants.

According to the Taulbee Survey [3], in 2014 only 292 out of the 1475 (19.8%) PhDs in computer science or computer engineering were awarded to women. Grad Cohort can have

Guiding Female Graduate Students Towards Success

an even bigger impact on the computing research pipeline if expanded to meet actual demand. Generous funding from industry, nonprofit associations, university computer science departments, and individual donors covers all participant travel and workshop expenses. In 2014, the funding allowed the workshop to accept only 304 of the 503 applicants. The participant selection process maximizes the number of schools represented in the group. With more funding, we can get more women prepared to excel in computer science research. If your institution is in a position to sponsor a few students (or many!), please contact me so that I can provide you with detailed information about the Grad Cohort initiative.

As I write this article, the 2015 dates for Grad Cohort have not been defined yet, but by the time you read this we may be approaching the application deadline. Usually, the workshop happens in April and student applications are due in late November. If you are a female graduate student, I encourage you to consider applying to the workshop. If you work with female graduate students who may not be aware of this program, please advise them to check out the CRA-W Web site, cra-w.org.

References

- [1] J. L. Cundiff, J. G. Stout, and H. Wright, CRA-W Grad Cohort 2014: Pretest/Posttest Evaluation Report, May 2014 (Computing Research Association: Washington, DC): <http://cra.org/ceerp/evaluation-reports>.
- [2] J. G. Stout and J. L. Cundiff, CRA-W Grad Cohort: Comparative Evaluation Report of 2011-2012 Participants, February 2014 (Computing Research Association: Washington, DC): <http://cra.org/ceerp/evaluation-reports>.
- [3] S. Zweben and B. Bizot, 2013 Taulbee Survey, *Computing Research News*, vol. 26, no. 5, May 2014: <http://www.cra.org/uploads/documents/resources/crndocs/2013-Taulbee-Survey.pdf>.



Do you know about the USENIX Open Access Policy?

USENIX is the first computing association to offer free and open access to all of our conferences proceedings and videos. We stand by our mission to foster excellence and innovation while supporting research with a practical bias. Your financial support plays a major role in making this endeavor successful.

Please help to us to sustain and grow our open access program. Donate to the USENIX Annual Fund, renew your membership, and ask your colleagues to join or renew today.

www.usenix.org/annual-fund