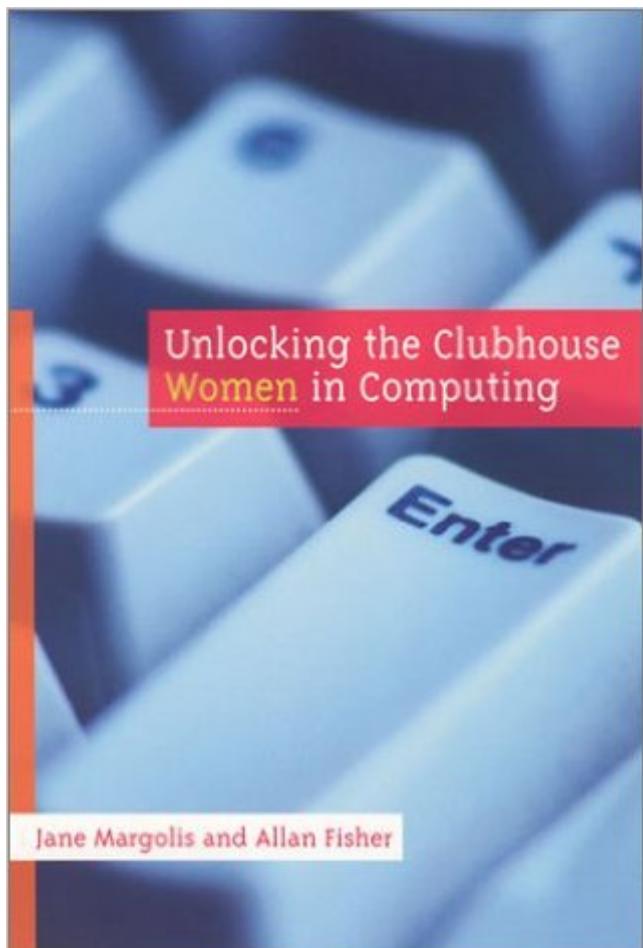


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# Unlocking The Clubhouse: Women In Computing (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

The information technology revolution is transforming almost every aspect of society, but girls and women are largely out of the loop. Although women surf the Web in equal numbers to men and make a majority of online purchases, few are involved in the design and creation of new technology. It is mostly men whose perspectives and priorities inform the development of computing innovations and who reap the lion's share of the financial rewards. As only a small fraction of high school and college computer science students are female, the field is likely to remain a "male clubhouse," absent major changes. In *Unlocking the Clubhouse*, social scientist Jane Margolis and computer scientist and educator Allan Fisher examine the many influences contributing to the gender gap in computing. The book is based on interviews with more than 100 computer science students of both sexes from Carnegie Mellon University, a major center of computer science research, over a period of four years, as well as classroom observations and conversations with hundreds of college and high school faculty. The interviews capture the dynamic details of the female computing experience, from the family computer kept in a brother's bedroom to women's feelings of alienation in college computing classes. The authors investigate the familial, educational, and institutional origins of the computing gender gap. They also describe educational reforms that have made a dramatic difference at Carnegie Mellon -- where the percentage of women entering the School of Computer Science rose from 7% in 1995 to 42% in 2000 -- and at high schools around the country.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an important book for everyone concerned about the causes and consequences of the nation's failure to attract undergraduate women into computer science. Margolis and Fishers' well-structured, longitudinal study is the first to explore multiple dimensions of this issue in careful detail, and their findings counter causal myths (e.g., about the "natural" distribution of interest and aptitude) that can inhibit or misdirect remedial efforts. Some roots of the recruitment problem lie in the inequities of pre-college access to computer experience; some (as other research has shown) reflect the gendered character of IT industry products that target children and young people. As a result, few of those female students who possess strong mathematical, linguistic, or logical thinking skills enter college with sufficient disciplinary knowledge and experience to entertain computer science as a major. They may also have limited information about the range of careers open to CS graduates. As the study also documents, women who do enter CS majors (approximately 15% of this student population) are apt to be discouraged by the misogyny of the peer culture (which varies from, but is related to, that documented in other science majors). They are often strongly distanced from the geek persona that they (wrongly) perceive to be a requirement for success. The emergence of CS as a discipline that defines itself in conceptual, theoretical, and technical terms, and somewhat avoids functional application or customer-programmer negotiation, also reduces the appeal of the major to those women who are primarily interested in what they can do with computers. This group looks elsewhere (e.g.

I picked up this book because I had observed the females in my CS department (including myself) drop like flies. I was curious as to the cause of it, but there didn't seem to be a common theme, so I thought this book might have some insight. It didn't. They cited several reasons women at CM were leaving, some of which were interesting, but the one that made me put down the book and walk away was when it claimed that it was because women are nurturing, and computer science needs to change to be more about using computers to nurture and care for people. To me, that sounded suspiciously like "Women aren't interested in computer science because it doesn't involve babies and ironing their husband's shirts!" Reading about the changes they instituted made me retch a little bit. They talk about specifically approaching female students and having "women in CS" gatherings. While I'm all for creating a supportive community, if my university had done this, I would have turned and run the other way. The reason I enjoyed my CS department so much was because nobody talked to me like I was any different, or made an issue of my genitalia, I was just another computer science student. Admittedly, a lot of my dissatisfaction with this book stems from my views on gender: I see men and women as fundamentally the same, but socialized to be different. Ultimately,

they're all people. It seems like the researchers found that certain types of people (those who wanted to nurture and pursue a variety of interests as opposed to single-mindedly obsessing over one) were not succeeding in computer science, and those types happened to be overwhelmingly female. They proceed to refer to these types of people and "women" interchangeably, which I feel is inaccurate.

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