App Girls camp seeks to boost number of women in engineering

By Kelly Cannon  Jun 11, 2014
Annika Wiebe, left, and Taylor Fang work on creating an app during the "App Girls" camp at Utah State on Tuesday morning. (John Zsiray/Herald Journal)

Instead of going to cheer camp or soccer camp, a group of local young girls are spending part of their summer vacation learning coding to build their own apps.

Called App Girls, the week-long camp held at Utah State University from June 9 to 13 is teaching middle school girls how to program apps that can be used on an Android smartphone.

App Girls is sponsored by the National Center for Women and Information Technology and is designed to promote women in computer science.

"In all engineering, the numbers (of women) are low," said Vicki Allan, an associate professor in computer science at USU and a counselor at the App Girls camp. "The number of women in computer science is especially bad."

Allan said there were 60 students who graduated from USU’s computer science program last year, only three of which were women. App Girls is hoping to change that.

Throughout the week, the girls are learning how to develop and program seven different apps that can be used on smartphones. The different apps include ones that play an mp3 and others that will allow you to paint on a picture. The culminating project is an interactive map of USU campus, using pictures and details created by the girls themselves.

The apps are geared toward women and girls to be useful instead of just a game.

"Women see the computer as something useful, and they want something useful from it," Allan said.

The girls are assisted by a group of high school-aged mentors. These older girls learned all about app development last week and are there to not only assist the girls but to mentor them.

Allan said the middle school girls are really thriving in designing the apps and seem to have little trouble figuring out how they work.

"The girls who signed up are interested in this kind of thing," Allan said. "They really seem to take to it."
Allan explained that by having women in computer science, the public is more likely to get a wide variety of products.

"If you just have men designers, it's going to look different," Allan said. "Women are creative and collaborative."

Allan also stressed how computer science is one of the top careers in the world right now and it's something that can be done from home.

"It's the best job in terms of salary and working conditions," Allan explained. "It's lucrative and they (women) can stay at home and work."

Thirteen-year-old Marissa Jensen is one of the girls attending the camp and has experience in computer programming.

"I wanted to see what it was like," Jensen said. "I've done coding before, so I wanted to see what else I could do."

kcannon@hjnews.com

Twitter: mskellycannon