Parkland Programmers turn to Independent Study in computer science

by Aaron Spikol

Over the past several years the Advanced Placement (AP) Computer Science course has seen decreasing student interest to the point where it was not offered last year and is not being offered this year. The administration and the programming teachers have attributed this to the large number of prerequisite classes that are required before a student is eligible to apply for AP Computer Science as well as to the existence of other AP classes such as AP Statistics and AP Art History which have no prerequisites and which draw potential students away. Last year a group of programming students organized a petition to attempt to reinstate the class but were told by the administration that an exception could not be made, as the number of interested and eligible students did not meet the required number of students to form a class.

"It was a letdown," said junior Hamidhasan Ahmed. "AP Computer science is the ultimate class, weighted, real serious. It's why you take the other three [prerequisite classes]." The prerequisite classes required a minimum of a year and a half to complete, though some students took additional programming classes as well. Most of the students did not become aware of the possibility that the AP Computer Science class would not be offered until they began taking the final prerequisite, Java Programming.

To make up for the lack of a class the administration offered the students the opportunity to pursue computer science as an independent study. Ahmed, along with fellow junior Timothy O'Brien and senior Steven Werley, who is applying

photo by Aaron Spikol

Parkland High School students working in a typical programming class.

to several colleges with the intention of pursuing a computer science major, accepted the administration's offer.

Independent study is a program in which students, under the auspices of a teacher advisor, receive a non-weighted credit for learning they take upon themselves outside of the classroom. "It's not really a class," said Werley. The students are provided with the AP Computer Science text book and are then expected to teach themselves, writing programs outside of school and bringing them in for their advisor, Mrs. Goldstein, to check before school, usually once a week.

"It's going to be hard," said Werley. "People complain about AP tests—we have to write a program by hand, without a computer. Even professionals forget the occasional semicolon. There is no compiling or debugging. It's like taking math and bringing together tons of equations to make a single program run smoothly."

Mrs. Goldstein, who has taught AP Computer Science before, expressed confidence in her students. "They're ambitious, very ambitious," she said. "I think they'll do well because they're motivated."

Mr. Ding, Parkland's other programming teacher, who was slated to teach the AP Computer Science class until it was cut, had encouragement for the students pursuing independent study. "That's great if they can teach themselves," he said. "It shows dedication. The class absolutely helps. If you want a degree, you have to take that class eventually."

The number of students interested in pursuing a computer science major has decreased not just in Parkland but nationwide. The number of college undergraduate majors in computer science had been declining for five years until this year, when it saw a small increase. Last year the College Board cut the AP Computer Science BC test citing lack of student interest, leaving only one AP Computer science test that students can take.

Mr. Ding, who himself recently received his masters in computer science, still believes that the discipline of computer science is an important one for today's society and that there is and will continue to be a high demand for that skill set. "The way of today is computers," he said.

Will AP Computer Science become a class again instead of remaining an independent study option? "Absolutely," replied Mr. Ding. "If we get the numbers."