$600K grant assists students

TCNJ to help students learn online technology

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EWING — Middle school students here will soon be creating interactive media online thanks to a $600,000 grant from the National Science Foundation.

The grant, announced recently, was issued to The College of New Jersey, which will supply undergraduates to help teach the program. The undergrads will work with teachers from Fisher Middle School to lead eighth-graders in a course this summer.

The eighth-graders will learn basic computer science, along with reporting and writing skills. Online journalism will also be part of the program. The grant, which began on Sept. 15 and lasts for three years, takes advantage of a new programming language called Scratch.

"Kids as young as 8 years old can learn to use Scratch," TCNJ assistant professor of computer science Monisha Pulimood said.

Scratch can be used to create animations, games, and other interactive programs. Examples can be found at http://scratch.mit.edu.

In addition, proficiency in database design and access will be highlighted.

"Most people don't know how to use database systems in a way that can help with your storytelling," Pulimood said.

Making computer science an appealing career choice to pre-college students, especially women and minorities, is also a goal.

"The intent of the grant that NSF had is to broaden the pipeline in computing science," Pulimood said.

"The results seem to suggest some girls, some students of color . . . tend to select out at an early age," said Kim Pearson, associate professor of English at the college. "Their perception is computer scientists are not people like them."

Pulimood agreed, saying that students can be easily discouraged from pursuing a career in computer science if their first exposure to the subject is difficult.

"We want to see if we can help them make up their minds in our favor earlier," she said. "We want to show middle schoolers that there is more to computer science than sitting in a dark corner with a computer in front of you."

Eighteen students from Fisher will participate in the summer course, with the goal being for the TCNJ undergrads, along with volunteers, to continue the project as an after-school program during the year, producing a news publication.

Pulimood said the need to ask questions in both fields makes computing and journalism good partners.

"It's something that's not obvious, but it's there," she said. "It's the same kind of mindset you need for computing."

Pearson said the third year of the program will be devoted to analyzing its results.

"We're also interested in seeing whether or not the students' interest in news journalism or their civic engagement has improved," she said.