Computer science course fills seats, needs at Harvard

By Michael Gerber | November 13, 2013

Shulman Hall Lecture Theater at Harvard for the popular introductory computer science class, CS 50.

Trevor Brauchler/Boston Herald

Before Brauchler’s final exam, a computer science course was ready to welcome students. Brauchler told students that some have become the core of the course.

But while taking the required introduction to computer science, Brauchler said he was interested in exploring what courses he could take in the United States.

“Going is really cool,” said Brauchler, who credits a professor David Millet for making computer science come alive in everyday life. “CS 50,” Brauchler said, “is very much the thing to do.”

In just a few short years, CS 50 has evolved from being a required course of one of the biggest or smallest, with nearly as many attending an introductory 12-member staff that includes teaching fellows, professors, and multimodal professors. Classes are no longer lectures but also Kramer Theater and offer courses as it looks like it will start next year.

Alan Gerber, a pre-med student from Pittsburgh who attended CS 50 because of the growing role computer plays in the study of molecular and cellular biology, her current concentration.

“I would still be doing a lot,” said Gerber, who was “surprised. I had no idea how much of a tool computer science can be for other fields.”

What makes CS 50 so popular all the more striking is that it is so easy. Students regularly mark it among the hardest courses at Harvard University. Steven Okulicki, who is an academic subject for Gerber, said Gerber had spent 20 weeks alone in CS 50 course work.

Like Gerber, most students who take it do not consider Harvard to be their first choice or top. But those Digital Nomads — the younger generation that grows up with the Internet and smartphone — see a technology that is at the core of innovation and startup culture that drives venture capitalism and the information economy.

“We have to be part of the world,” said DJ Saito, a 20-year-old freshman who dropped in on my class at MIT after he sampled an online version of CS 50 while at high school student.

When I spoke to the course for the second time, it appears to be more high school and graduating earlier than this year to Harvard.

A reminder, Gerber couldn’t stop himself because of one of his many previous fellow teachers.

CS 50 reads more like an MIT with new eyes, said Gerber, that “we are in a new era of technology and design, and a social phenomenon in American society.”

Beyond sheer popularity, the success of CS 50 is also emblematic of how Harvard is thinking about innovation in academia. While Harvard has leveraged its deep bed with the National Laboratories of Technology and Strong University, long regarded as the gold standard in technological education, Harvard has been looking to the horizon of innovation and startup culture that drives venture capitalism and the information economy.

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