

# What Michigan is doing to nurture the next generation of women in technology

By Brittany Thomas



Technology Education



It's a pivotal time for women in technology. With handfuls of layoffs resulting from the coronavirus pandemic and ensuing financial hardship, companies have been forced to vacate high-power, in-demand positions. Because of MCWT, women have an opportunity to scoot into these positions, which have been notoriously dominated by men over the years.

The Michigan Council of Women in Technology Foundation has dedicated 14 years to nurturing and preparing girls and young women for professional technology opportunities and careers. Through its strong list of programming, networking, and enrichment opportunities, MCWT aims to position Michigan as the number one state for women in technology during a time that could expect nearly 1 million open jobs in technology and technology-related fields.

Melanie Kalmar, MCWT's president of over eight years, described the organization's inception as nothing short of a women's empowerment and advancement initiative.

"A few ladies got together after deciding there wasn't enough being done locally to address the disproportionate representation of women in the technology sector," Kalmar said. "We created MCWT because we wanted to see this change. We wanted a central role in embodying this standard and helping thousands of girls and young women achieve their dream of working in the dynamic, ever-changing technology industry."

MCWT supports six immersive programs yearly that provide hands-on, vital experience and education to girls in as early as the fourth grade. With K-12 and college initiatives, MCWT offers technological coaching and assistance throughout students' academic careers.

Participation in MCWT's programming, events, seminars, and other development activities allows students to practice and articulate important technological skills. The programs teach and enforce the importance of early networking and mentorship for girls and actively demonstrate the relevance that collaborative work, strong, impactful relationships, skill development, and networking opportunities have in locating professional technology job opportunities.

The six programs the organization currently offers are Girls Rock IT, Camp Infinity, Robotics Grants, Girls Get-IT, Women in Transition, and an upcoming Website Design Competition. Last month, MCWT released a statement announcing the launch of its sixth program, which is slated to begin in October 2020.

"The Web Design Competition is a program we gave a lot of thought and consideration to, and now I think we're ready to phase that into our organization's mission," Programming Director Allison Morris said. "With the web design competition, we have the opportunity to expand on the importance of HTML, coding, and back-end website maintenance, which high school courses don't quite touch on at length. These skills are essential in the field of technology and give our girls leverage when it comes time for them to apply for tech jobs."

It's initiatives like this that have the organization leading retention efforts around the world. An elaborate 2019 study compared global female technology major retention rates to those of MCWT. In contrast to a global retention rate of less than ten percent, MCWT found a way to achieve a ninety percent retention rate of all female tech majors that received a college scholarship from the organization.

"I think this was achieved in part by the preparedness students had entering university after their involvement with our organization," Kalmar said. "Equipping students in our programs with the confidence, knowledge, experience, and attitude necessary to excel in this field is what made the most impact. The scholarship award sweetened the deal."



*Pictured: Four 2019 MCWT scholarship award winners and their mothers. From left: Alexa Mason, Katherine Gifford, Anna Kimelski, and Gabrielle Newsome.*

What's most telling of MCWT and its capability to prepare the next generation of female technology leaders comes straight from the lips of one of the organization's 2019 scholarship recipients, Anna Kimelski.

"MCWT and its programs extend far beyond the textbook-heavy, lecture-style curriculum typical of a high school classroom," Kimelski said. "MCWT focuses on practical application of skills learned and stresses the importance of technology outside of tech-focused companies."

Kimelski hesitantly began working with MCWT during her second semester of eighth grade, but today, she accredits it for a near full-ride scholarship to Oakland University where she will be studying educational leadership in the fall.

“I wasn’t sure how I’d be able to benefit from such a technology-focused program,” Kimelski said. “After meeting with and speaking to industry experts from Blue Cross Blue Shield, Walmart, and Meijer, it became apparent that technology skills and application of those skills would come in handy in any profession. We live in a digital age, so, data, its integrity, and dissemination are a valuable part of every company’s planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation processes today.”

MCWT has only expanded on opportunities, funds, and strategies since its development, and every new year brings new challenges and new techniques. However, the future looks bright for MCWT and its near 1,200 members and affiliates.

“Much like any other industry, the technology world continues to evolve rapidly. There’s no telling what methods will be developed tomorrow and what strategies will be adopted or thrown out as a result,” Kalmar said. “We’ve already secured funding for another several years of programming, so, our goal for the future is to continue educating ourselves so we can continue providing leading-edge knowledge, advice, opportunity, and mentorship to our girls.”

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