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Closing the Gap: Behind a Longtime Corporate STEM Funder's New Work on Women and Girls

Julia Travers

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The IT company Cognizant has supported the development of the STEM workforce for years, most notably through its Making the Future program. This strategy falls in line with a larger trend we've covered of corporations using their funding to train and upskill the kinds of employees they will need. [Making the Future](#) launched in 2011 and focuses on Maker culture and spaces—creative, hands-on learning environments where people experience and explore STEM equipment, processes and, *making*. While this program is still going strong, [Cognizant](#) wanted to be more proactive in addressing the looming talent shortage in tech-related fields, and so it recently launched a foundation. It just hired a female executive director for the [Cognizant U.S. Foundation](#), and one of its earliest grants aims to bolster female

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“Ensuring women and girls are equipped to thrive in the digital economy is critical to the success of our communities, our country and our company,” Cognizant U.S. Foundation Executive Director Kristen Titus tells us.

Funding for females is an active segment of STEM education philanthropy. We’ve seen tech funders like [Apple](#), Google, VEX Robotics, Akamai Technologies, Intel, VMWare and the Motorola Mobility Foundation, among others, back education, training and mentoring for girls and women in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math. And boosting diversity in general within these overly homogeneous fields remains a popular cause. Through these endeavors, companies contribute to societal equity and also invest in their own futures as the country grows increasingly diverse, supporting and connecting with a broader and more varied pool of STEM professionals from which to hire.

A New Foundation to Grow the STEM Workforce of Tomorrow

Cognizant announced its intention to form this foundation with an initial \$100 million in funding in early 2018. It points to a significant skills gap in the U.S. as validation for its creation, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that predict a 1.4-million-person gap between software development jobs and qualified applicants by 2020. Cognizant hired more than 6,000 U.S. workers in 2017 and plans to grow its workforce by about 25,000 over the next five years. And Cognizant also states that along with creating the foundation, it has sponsored recruiting, training and reskilling initiatives in New York, Iowa and Florida, with additional programs upcoming in Arizona and Texas.

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In the spring of last year, the foundation launched with an inaugural grant of \$1.5 million to Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont, to fund the nonprofits' digital literacy training, a new lab and advanced IT courses. Subsequent grants have gone to the New York City-based Civic Hall, a nonprofit innovation center that offers digital skills trainings; to fund a partnership with the Wounded Warrior Project and CompTIA's Creating IT Futures Foundation that helps American military veterans gain tech skills for career advancement; and, most recently, to the National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT) to provide digital education to more than 10,000 women and girls by 2021.

The Foundation's First Executive Director

Kristen Titus, who's heading up this relatively new foundation, was previously the first chief technology and innovation officer for New York State. She was also the founding executive director of the NYC Tech Talent Pipeline and Girls Who Code—a nonprofit we have often mentioned because of its popularity with tech funders. Titus has appeared on numerous who's who lists of the young, tech-savvy and influential, especially among women. Of bringing girls STEM experiences, she tells IP:

I've seen firsthand just how transformative this work can be and understand the urgency of our mission. The technology training and education landscape has evolved dramatically over the last decade, and the role of philanthropy has never been more important. Being among the foundations exclusively focused on STEM education and skills training, we are poised to support the field in defining what works.



The foundation's choice of a well-qualified female leader with an impressive background of increasing girls' access to computer science segues nicely into its recent grantmaking news.

A Focus on the Gender Gap and an Appreciation for Diversity

While the skills gap is this foundation's main priority, the gender gap is a key and clearly overlapping issue.

"As of 2017, women held only 26 percent of professional computing occupations in the United States," Lucy Sanders, chief executive officer and co-founder of NCWIT, [pointed out](#).

A \$4.1 million grant to the NCWIT will be used to establish new coding camps for girls and women and training for school counselors "in communities historically lacking computing education resources and a technology workforce." The funds will primarily be directed toward the South and Southeastern U.S., and the resulting projects are expected to "influence career opportunities" for more than 13,000 people.

Cognizant also aims to promote gender equity in-house, through an initiative called [Woman Empowered](#) (WE), which focuses on recruiting more women and providing women with career growth, leadership development and networking opportunities. The company runs targeted diversity programs and groups as well, which serve LGBTQI team members, veterans and those who identify as "Black, African, African-American, Latino or Hispanic."



“At Cognizant, we believe that our differences should be celebrated and that an inclusive culture inspires creativity and innovation,” the company states.

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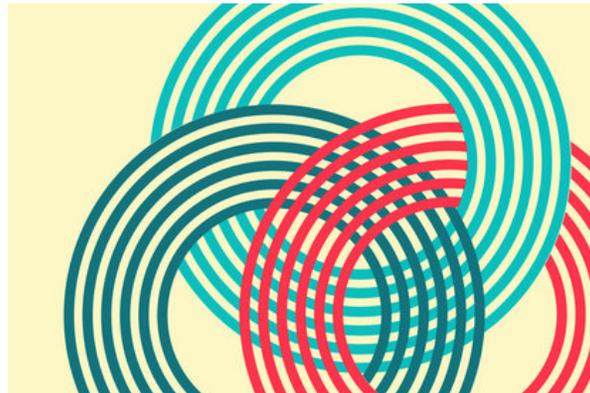
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