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## Students help bridge the engineering gender gap

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UNO civil engineering senior Simone Rock, left, helps Central High student Jasmyn Flowers, 16, build a model bridge.

Tessa Phillips said there aren't many girls in her engineering classes at Omaha North High School, a science, math and engineering magnet school.

"There are a lot of girls in the classes at the start of freshman year, but each year the number gets smaller," she said. Phillips said there is only one senior girl in engineering this school year.

The Society of Women Engineers aimed to change that by hosting "WOW! That's Engineering!" Saturday at the Kiewit Institute on the University of Nebraska at Omaha south campus. The event was designed to encourage young women to consider careers in engineering and technology.

Engineering has historically been a predominantly male field, and that can be intimidating for girls, said Holly Bitzinger, an event volunteer and junior architectural engineering major at UNO.

However, the 40 high school girls who attended Saturday's event appeared eager to enter the field of engineering.

"It's so fun. Most people don't know that," said Phillips, 16. "In how many other classes do they tell you, 'Go get an electrical appliance and we'll help you take it apart.'"

Phillips said she likes the hands-on activities, such as building model houses, that her engineering classes offer. The classes also allow her to apply information learned in other courses, such as pre-calculus and physics, in a practical manner, she said.

"You get to be so creative," said Tailla Strawn, one of Phillips' classmates.

Strawn said she was attracted to engineering because it allows her to design and build while being creative.

She said she could see how some students might be discouraged. Sometimes engineering may seem difficult, she said, but just keep trying.

Jennifer Johnson, 15, a sophomore at Omaha North, has been taking engineering classes since she was a seventh-grader at McMillan Magnet Center for math and technology.

Johnson said she wants to go into engineering because her work would be widely appreciated and help people.

Bitzinger, the volunteer, estimated that about 30 percent of the engineering students at UNO are women. That's better than in the past, she said, but still not ideal.

Bitzinger said that unlike the girls at the "WOW" event, she did not get a lot of support for her

interest in engineering when she was younger.

"When I told my grandmother that I was going to be an engineer, she was ashamed to tell people" because she thought it was a man's job, Bitzinger said.

Bitzinger was one of only three female pre-engineering majors when she started at Doane College several years ago. All three women have since transferred to UNO, she said.

Her experiences have made her all the more willing to encourage young women interested in engineering.

"It's really cool to offer this opportunity to high school girls," she said.