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Rosson Will Study Non-Programmers As Part of Six-University NSF Grant

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Mary Beth Rosson likes software glitches and is intrigued by how they end up in programs.

The professor of information sciences and technology doesn't have much interest in debugging software herself. Instead Rosson wants to know how other people recognize and deal with their computing problems. She is particularly interested in how non-programmers discover and fix software bugs.

Rosson will focus on computer users' programming errors as part of a six-campus team of computer scientists on a National Science Foundation project, End Users Shaping Effective Software (EUSES). NSF recently announced the \$2.6-million Information Technology Research award.

"What I want to know is how non-programmers think about the opportunities for software development, how they understand their own aptitudes and abilities, and how they approach software construction projects," Rosson said.

Most computer users don't think of themselves as programmers, but they are whenever they create Web sites or spreadsheets. Those end-user programmers will number 55 million by 2005 and will have created millions of programs with glitches, according to research cited by the EUSES Consortium.

That may be a conservative estimate.

"Researchers have found that 90 percent of spreadsheets have bugs in them," Rosson said.

By studying how end-user programmers discover and resolve these glitches, researchers hope to develop strategies to help people identify bugs. That eventually could lead to creating debugging tools for use during development, Rosson said.

Rosson is the only researcher from Penn State involved in the project. Others on the team are from Oregon State University, Carnegie Mellon University, Drexel University, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and Cambridge University. The lead investigator is Margaret Burnett from Oregon State.

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