



University of Pennsylvania: The Dining Philosophers

by [Sara Carlstead](#)

The more I find out about different ACM student chapters, the more I realize that they each have their own style and interests. The Dining Philosophers, as the University of Pennsylvania calls their chapter, seem to concentrate on the more "philosophic" side of computer science. Their biggest activity seems to be sponsoring speakers, and the group seems less involved with hacker style projects and special interest groups than some of the other chapters we've highlighted recently in Down the Road.

You might wonder why they call themselves the Dining Philosophers. Is it because they seem to relish the more philosophical side of computer science, and sponsor lots of talks and educational workshops? Or might it be because they like to eat, as their free BBQ gathering this fall might demonstrate? The official answer, according to their homepage (which also features a [Java animation](#) of the Dining Philosopher problem), is that the name comes from a classic multi-process synchronization problem. ``The problem consists of five philosophers sitting at a table who do nothing but think and eat. Between each philosopher, there is a single stick. In order to eat, a philosopher must have both sticks. A problem can arise if each philosopher grabs the stick on the right, then waits for the stick on the left. In this case a deadlock has occurred, and all philosophers will starve. Also, the philosophers should be fair. Each philosopher should be able to eat as much as the rest." Nevertheless, The Dining Philosophers seems an appropriate name for this group.

The group's biggest activity is sponsoring talks. Recent talks have included Brian Kernighan, *Little Languages and How They Grow*; Peter Winkler, *Intuition and Probability* and *Comparison Without Disclosure*; and Joan Feigenbaum, *Security and Privacy in the Information Economy* and *Mathematics, Computer Science, or Both?*. Upcoming talks include Bjarne Stroustrup and Ron Graham. In addition to the talks, the group also sponsors dinners with the speakers so that students can talk with experts in an informal environment. The group also has a great situation with their library; since it is difficult for the librarians to keep up with the changing computing world, the Dining Philosophers recommend books and the library purchases them. This sounds like a great way for chapters to keep up with current books, while not having to spend their own money to do so.

The Dining Philosophers also have two Internet education projects. The first is **NetSurf**, a series of two-

hour seminars on how to use the Internet. Netsurf was started in 1994 when an alum noticed that there was no formal way for students to learn about the Internet. Concerned, he went to the administration and students, recommending that they do something. The Dining Philosophers took up the challenge. In a related project, the chapter has taken on educating one of their residential college houses. The house strives to ``host initiatives in the using of the Internet in a residential/academic environment," and the Dining Philosophers are leading an effort to spread the ``Internet gospel." They are also involved in an effort to bring the Internet to a local inner city high school. In partnership with a local TV station, Penn students in the Dining Philosophers are helping set up equipment to allow the students to publish literature and artwork on the web.

In addition to these activities, the Dining Philosophers are currently in the planning/funding stage of setting up their own server. They also are lucky enough to be in Philadelphia, home of the Eniac, on that famous computer's fiftieth birthday. As part of the birthday celebration they plan to host a talk by Richard Stallman and sponsor a party at Penn for fellow ACM student members during the Big Event conference. They also have a newsletter, amusingly titled *[Don't Panic](#)*. A back issue of *Don't Panic* includes articles, pictures, and [movie \(mpeg\) clips of the groups volleyball team](#).

If your chapter is doing new or interesting stuff, drop me a line at saracarl@rice.edu.