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Morris Latterell Visiting Alumnus Brent Heeringa ’99 to speak on startups, research, and teaching

Summary: The assistant professor of computer science at Williams College will meet with students and faculty throughout his November campus visit.

(November 8, 2010)-Brent Heeringa ’99, assistant professor of computer science at Williams College, is the University of Minnesota, Morris 2010–11 Latterell Visiting Alumnus. The computer science and math major will meet with students and faculty throughout his November 7–9, 2010 visit to campus. His presentation on Monday, November 8 at 7:30 p.m. in the Science Auditorium, “From Startups to Scholarship: Life in the Liberal Arts after UMM,” is free and open to the public. After a question and answer session, a reception follows in the Science Atrium.

Heeringa says he is attracted to computer science and math because “both provide a very formal but flexible framework for solving problems. Within this framework, there is immeasurable opportunity for creativity. I find this creative element of problem solving very attractive.”

At Williams College, Heeringa teaches courses such as Theory of Computation and Algorithm Design and Analysis. “I enjoy seeing my students wrap their heads around big, complex ideas,” says Heeringa. “I like it when they have insights that never dawned on me. I am inspired by the challenge of delivering a good lecture. Each time I teach, I hope to find the right analogy, the right picture, the right words that culminate in a clear explanation.”

Computer science, reminds Heeringa, is a relatively young field. Development is continually underway as new methods are created to solve foundational problems and classical solutions are adapted to address modern applications of those problems. “This continual adaptation of both problem and solution is exciting as a teacher and as a scholar,” says Heeringa. “As a teacher, research and technological innovation still drive course content. To be relevant in the classroom, I need to be an engaged, active scholar outside of the classroom. I enjoy this interplay very much.”

Heeringa has been involved with two start-up companies, experiences that give him, he says, “street cred” with his students. In 2005, he was one of the first two employees for Adverplex, a company that specializes in pay-per-click advertising, created by his doctorate adviser, Micah Adler. In 2008, Adler started Fluent Mobile, which develops algorithms for mobile content delivery and organization, and developed Fluent News, a popular news aggregator application for iPhone. Heeringa served as a consultant.

“I enjoy startups,” he says. “You wear a lot of hats, which makes the work dynamic and extraordinary. Startup experience helps me be a better professor—I have real world experience that informs my teaching and advising.”

In addition to being excited about telling current students about “immeasurable opportunities that await after graduation,” Heeringa is eager to return to Morris to visit professors and friends, to reflect on his UMM experience, to recount stories, and to grab a burger and fries at Don’s.

Heeringa earned a doctorate in 2006 and a master of science in 2002 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
Privately funded with gifts from alumni, faculty, staff, and Latterell friends and family, the Joseph J. Latterell Memorial Visiting Alumnus Program provides annual grants to disciplines within the Division of Science and Mathematics to invite alumni to campus to serve as resource persons for students and faculty.

If you are unable to attend the event, the presentation will be streamed live.

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