At Smith, computer dissection offers hands-on understanding

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NORTHAMPTON - Motherboards, memory chips and processors: the "techie" generation knows these terms, but perhaps with only a fuzzy idea of the physical objects they represent. Smith College students in a recent class on how computers work met these computer innards in person.

Dominique Thiebaut, an associate professor, fortified the students in McConnell foyer with coffee and instructed them to take apart a computer tower as best they could.

"I want the students to not be afraid of computers," Thiebaut said.

"You kind of have to think differently about it" after taking a computer apart, Morgan Middlebrook, 21, said.

Thiebaut asked Smith's technology services for dead computers and got 15, mostly Dells. The assignment was to take everything apart, take pictures of each piece and identify it. The students, working in pairs, will then create a Wikipedia page as a sort of lab report.

"It's awesome. I'm trying not to break stuff, but it's not going to bite me," Sierra Brezina, 20, said.

Most of the students didn't know when they registered that the class would involve taking apart a computer. The tables were filled with colorful cables, screws and a variety of metal pieces. Students were allowed to use a screwdriver and their hands to deconstruct the towers.

"We're really glad Dominique gave us coffee before we took apart something technical," senior Emily Everett said. "I have more respect for those people who do their own computer stuff," Virginia Lunt, 18, said. "It's very interesting."

Several people from the Smith Information Technology Services offered assistance.

"This hasn't been formally done before. Students know how to use computers, but now they know what goes into them. It's a good, basic familiarization," Eric Jensen, one of the ITS people on hand, said. The computer pieces will be recycled.

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