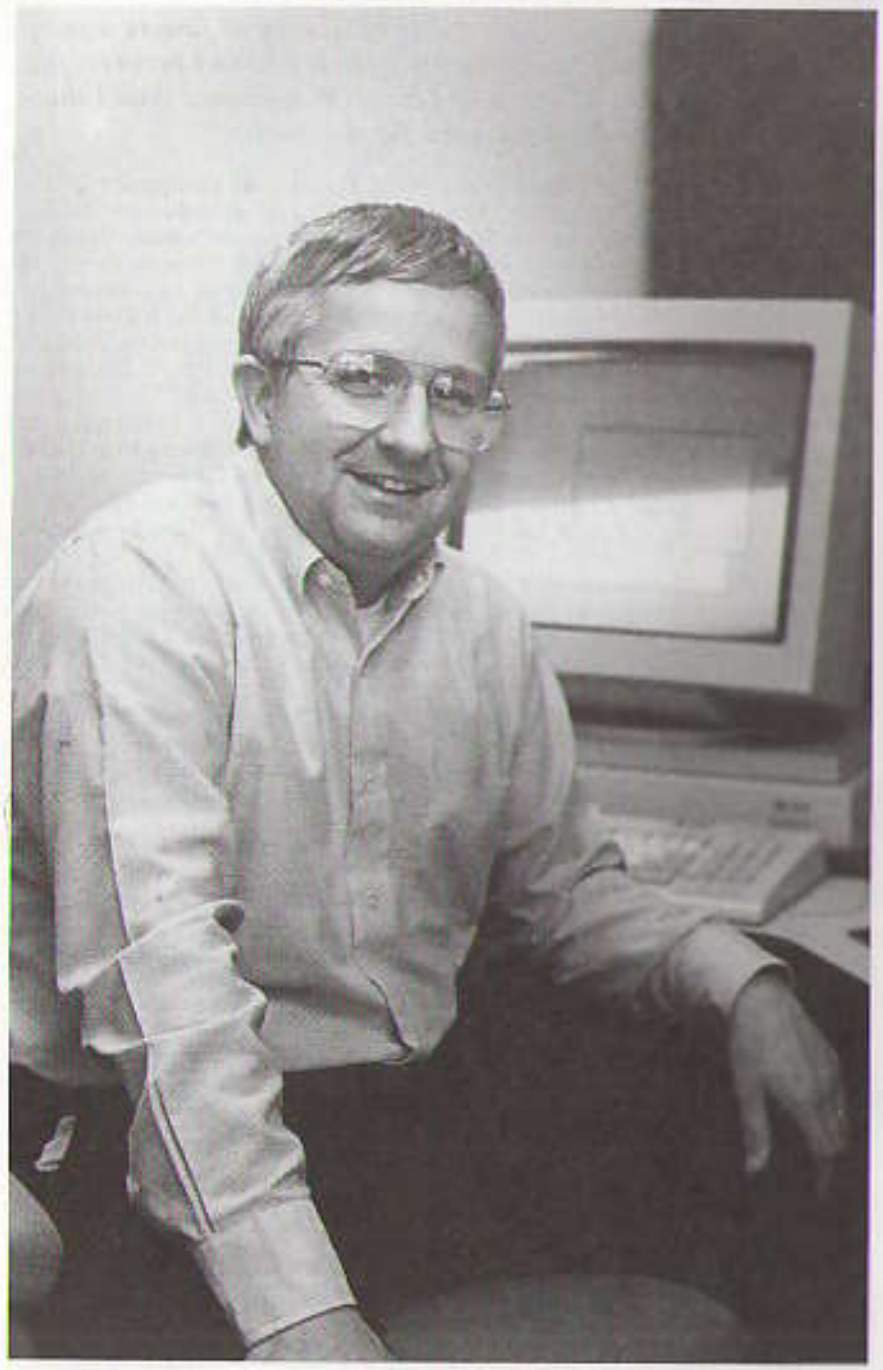

"The important thing is learning how to learn, because that's what they're going to be doing all their lives."

Herbert Dershem, professor of computer science and chairperson of the department, believes that the most important aspect of an education is learning to learn.

In computer science, he thinks it's especially true. "Basically what I'm teaching is problem solving, and my philosophy is that you can't really learn to solve problems if you don't have to struggle with them."

Consequently, he assures that all his students come across difficult problems. He knows it may be the first time some students have had to struggle with a problem, while others may have been wrestling with difficult problems since high school.

"I always liken it to a wall," Dershem says. "All the walls, the problems, that they've seen before have been walls they could step over, and different people have different lengths of legs, so some can step over higher walls than others. But, if you've been able to step over every wall you see, you've never learned to climb those walls."

"So, when they get into my courses, I want to make sure that I put up some walls for them that they can't step over, and they have walls that they have to climb," Dershem says, "so they learn how to climb walls; so they learn how to wrestle with a problem that isn't easy for them. Because, when you get into the real world you don't get paid for solving easy problems — you get paid for solving hard ones, and that's why you have to be able to tackle those kinds of problems."

The reason Dershem believes it's so important that he teach his students to wrestle with problems and overcome walls is that in computer science the tools the students are learning to use today will in all likelihood be obsolete in the near future — and that means that the students will have to know how to adapt.

"If we're just teaching our students how to use this equipment, that's not going to help them five years from now, because this equipment is going to be gone and there's going to be something new there," Dershem says. "The important thing is learning how to learn, because that's what they're going to be doing all their lives."

Dershem believes the philosophy is applicable to everyone. "In a field that changes so rapidly it's not the content that matters but the mindset of being a life-long learner, of continually adapting to new situations, to new techniques, to new environments. That's they key thing for people in this field," Dershem says. "And not just for this field. That's the key thing for life in general, to be able to adapt to changing circumstances."

Herbert L. Dershem
Professor of Computer Science