

New center will conduct research on mathematics education

by Joanne Nesti - October 22, 2007

A new interdisciplinary center for research in mathematics education has been established that combines the efforts of faculty in the Department of Mathematics in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Neag School of Education.

The Center was developed by two faculty members, Tom DeFranco, associate dean of the Neag School, and Charles Vinsonhaler, a professor – recently retired – in the math department.

Last spring, after more than five years of effort, their vision of a Center for Research in Mathematics Education won approval from the UConn Board of Trustees.

DeFranco, the director of the new center, describes it as “a bridge between two cultures.”

As a professor in the Neag School who holds a joint appointment in the Department of Mathematics, he is well positioned to operate in both “cultures.”

He hopes the Center will be a blending of the math department’s orientation toward content and the Neag School’s interest in pedagogy and performance, from those with a desire to teach mathematics.

The seed for the Center was planted more than 10 years ago when DeFranco and Vinsonhaler, who was chair of the math department at the time, began discussing and working on issues in mathematics education.

This collaboration led to their writing a book on mathematical problem solving, co-teaching an innovative course on mathematics pedagogy to teaching assistants in the math department, co-authoring research articles, and jointly securing grant funding.

Most importantly, says DeFranco, their efforts resulted in the establishment of a “mathematics education presence” within the mathematics department.

Both DeFranco and Vinsonhaler have been recognized for excellence in teaching – they were named University Teaching Fellows in 2001 and 1994 respectively.

They say what works in teaching is a combination of passion and compassion: passion for the subject and for teaching, plus the compassion and willingness to do whatever it takes to help a student learn.

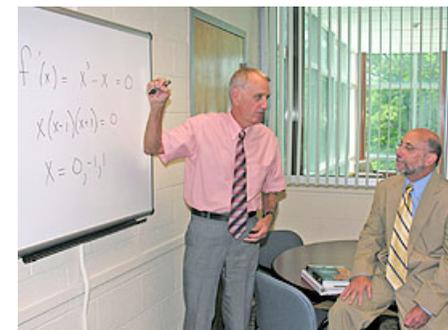
The Center is committed to enhancing the quality of mathematics curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

A large part of its work will involve partnerships with school districts and an active search for grant funding to support the Center’s professional development activities.

Over time, DeFranco says, “The Center’s mission will focus on putting together a comprehensive research agenda to help us understand the teaching and learning of mathematics at the K-16 level.”

DeFranco and Vinsonhaler believe that by drawing upon the expertise of faculty in both the Neag School and the Department of Mathematics, the Center can improve the teaching and learning of mathematics throughout the state of Connecticut as well as at the University.

Those involved in the Center include Neag School faculty members Tutita Casa and Kathy Gavin from the Department of Educational Psychology, and Mary Truxaw and Megan Staples from the Department of Curriculum & Instruction; and Department of Mathematics faculty members including Fabiana Cardetti, Sarah Glaz, Joe McKenna, and Tom Roby.



Charles Vinsonhaler, left, a recently retired professor of mathematics, and Tom DeFranco, associate dean of the Neag School of Education, at the Center for Research in Mathematics Education.

Photo by Janice Palmer