

Math prof's methods add up to top award

DALEY COLLEGE | Educator who teaches students critical thinking wins honor despite being 'up against some famous people'

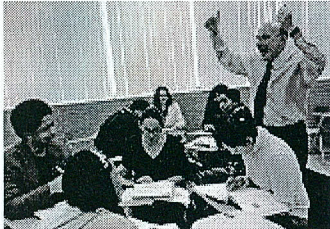
Recommend (12)
Comments
November 9, 2008

BY DAVE NEWBART Staff Reporter dnewbart@suntimes.com

The group of five students at Daley College intensely dissects a question about the chances someone with a box full of 10 computer disks would randomly grab the only two that are defective. After some discussion and debate, the group -- including a would-be lawyer, nurses in training and a mother of four -- figure out there is a one in 45 chance of that happening.

Math professor Vali Siadat hovers nearby in case the students need help, but the fact he didn't have to intervene, students said, shows that a method of teaching he developed works well for entry-level math students from a variety of backgrounds, including some from lower-performing Chicago Public Schools.

» [Click to enlarge image](#)



Vali Siadat (standing), who holds two doctorates, has won the "gold standard" of math awards. Past winners have come from Harvard, MIT and the University of Chicago.

(Jean Lachat/Sun-Times)

"We all feed off each other's strengths," said Robert Jones-Acklin, 21. "I learn more this way than sitting there for a lecture for four hours."

Siadat's teaching methods, which he has developed over 26 years at Daley College on the Southwest Side, have drawn praise from more than just students.

In January, he will be awarded the Deborah and Franklin Tepper Haimo Award of Distinguished Teaching of Mathematics at a major meeting in Washington D.C. The prize -- considered the "gold standard" of national math awards -- has never before been given to a community college professor.

"I was surprised I got it because I was up against some famous people," Siadat said of the award bestowed by the 23,000-member Mathematical Association of America.

In 2005, he was named Illinois Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Although Siadat, 63, of Lake View, has two doctoral degrees, including one from the University of Illinois at Chicago, he said he remains at Daley because he prefers to work with the diverse, nontraditional students at City Colleges.

An Iranian native, Siadat said early in his career he realized standard teaching methods did not work as well for remedial math students. He developed the "Keystone Method" which focused on letting students learn in small groups, quizzing them frequently about concepts learned and giving them constant feedback on how they are doing in class. Based on the frequent quizzes, Siadat can go back and review areas where students did poorly.

The method focuses on developing critical thinking and logical reasoning skills, not just memorizing formulas.

In a study published in August in the math journal *Primus*, Siadat found that students taught using his method scored better on tests and did better in class. In addition, students also did better in subsequent math courses and even did better on reading tests.

"I think of the classroom as a learning community," he said. "Everyone should take interest in everyone else's learning."

Colon Adams, a math professor at Williams College who oversees the MAA award selection committee, said Siadat's "deep concern for the students, and his desire to do everything in his power to help them, made him stand out."

Past winners of the award have come from schools including MIT, the University of Chicago and Harvard.

"Having a big impact on a diverse student body using the limited resources available makes his accomplishments all the more impressive," Adams said.

Back in the classroom, students who also work full-time jobs and have families say they nevertheless like taking the time to mull over problems with other students.

"It's not just moving numbers around," said nursing student Veronica Kapa, 33, a mother of four. "You really have to think and use logic. ... You learn from other people -- and they learn from you."