

Daley College professor honored

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Frustrated math students should be heartened by the story of M. Vali Siadat.

Siadat had little interest in math when he was in high school in Iran.

"I never thought I would be a mathematician," he said Thursday. "I was always afraid of mathematics and mathematics teachers. It all seemed like something unattainable. It was like God, something I could never reach or touch."

Yet, on Thursday, Siadat was in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., being honored as Illinois' 2005 Professor of the Year. Siadat received the honor from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

For 31 years, Siadat has been teaching, of all things, mathematics. Since 1997, Siadat has been chairman of the Department of Mathematics at Richard J. Daley College. Siadat, 60, is best known for developing and implementing a program that greatly helped college students understand basic mathematics.

The program, called the Keystone Project, quizzes students frequently, almost daily, on the subject matter at hand. This emphasis on frequent quizzes forces students to keep current on their studies and enhances focus and concentration.

It also allows instructors to determine immediately if students are mastering the subject matter and adjust the coursework accordingly.

"We found that students have poor work and study habits," said Siadat, referring to the co-founder of the program, Yoram Sagher, a former math professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"They don't come to class, and they have poor attention spans and limited time horizons for learning the work," he said. "Too often, they are passive and disregard teacher's statements, and Dr. Sagher and I decided we had to come up with a system that addresses these difficulties." Siadat first studied this theory while doing doctoral work at UIC. Despite his early disinterest in math, Siadat immigrated to the United States from Tehran to become an engineer.

"Everyone thought I should be an engineer because they lead good lives," he said. "But I began teaching some courses part-time around Chicago, and I found my niche: I am a teacher."

While doing undergraduate work at the University of California at Berkeley, he realized that he had a penchant for mathematics, but his previous math teachers had failed to motivate him. So at UIC, he sought to develop a teaching method that would inspire students.

"Inspiration is the most important thing," he said.

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