



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## *The Algebra Cup*

A few semesters ago, confronted with the appalling numbers of student withdrawals from mathematics classes, I was challenged to provide a rationale by which the numbers could be justified. I lamely offered the national scope of the situation: People the country over seemed to experience math anxiety; entire books had been written about it. This was not a problem peculiar to our college! For some reason, this explanation did not seem to appease the challenger. He felt that surely those of us in mathematics could do something to correct this situation. I said I would take it under serious consideration, although I was wondering what I could possibly do without sacrificing the sacred syllabus and even come close to "getting the job done."

During pre-registration for the spring semester, students had filled my College Algebra class. Now, I could flatter myself and say that this occurred because the word had finally gotten out—the student body at last had heard of the high quality of my instruction. That would be coloring the picture! The truth is the word was out that I permitted the use of organized notes on notecards as an acceptable resource on all tests and quizzes, except on the course competency exam. Also, word had gotten out about the famous "Partnership Exam" allowed in my classes—two students could put their brains together, along with both sets of notes, to take the exams. Of course, the word had not gotten out that students could fail even with these wonderful resources. But the anxiety was removed.

I requested that my College Algebra class be reopened—I wanted as many students as would sign up. I wanted to demonstrate that I could teach a large class in mathematics and could retain the students. (I was not exactly sure *how*, but I was ready to try.) My course began with 55 students and ended with 51. I wish to share what happened in the interim.

First, I conferred with a calculus teaching colleague. We decided upon the five most important topics with which a student must be proficient in order to assure success in the study of calculus. When I first met with the class, I announced to the students that the class would not be taught in the traditional fashion—that we would be covering, in great detail, only those five

topics. If anyone felt he was going to receive insufficient instruction, he was advised to drop the course immediately. However, if he chose to stay, he was to consider it his responsibility not to drop at all. One student chose to withdraw.

The class was divided into five groups—one for each of the five topics. Each group chose a team name, a leader, a truant officer, and a recordkeeper. The recordkeeper was to keep attendance; and when, in his judgment, some team member had too many absences, he/she was to notify the team truant officer—who was to contact the offender. The leader was to return papers to team members, to coordinate study meetings, and to organize her team's preparation of a study sheet.

I chose to record the students alphabetically by team. All papers had to be identified by student name and team name; stacks of team papers were the standard method for submitting assignments.

Team spirit developed right away: team members chose to sit in the same area of the room; the class "booed" the second person who came in with a drop-slip. (The third student to withdraw came by the office, rather than the classroom.) But the real spirit of the class developed in quite an unplanned way. During the race for the Americus Cup, I was grading quizzes. Returning the papers at the next class meeting, I wrote "The Algebra Cup" on the board, followed by each team's name and its score. The idea caught on—team spirit ran high the remainder of the course.

When I realized the class would end with about a 7% withdrawal, I asked the director for a *real* Algebra Cup. Today in the college trophy case is that cup, with the names of "The Factoring Fools," who finished first, inscribed!

Of those students who pursued calculus and with whom I was able to maintain contact, none made lower than an average grade from any institution. There is something to be said for cooperative effort in the pursuit of knowledge!

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## Competition: A Recruitment Strategy

As many of our schools suffer from declining enrollments, we are forced to look at ways to encourage students to register in our programs. Some people may fool themselves into thinking that this is a task for the marketing department. But I believe marketing to be the domain of each faculty member, working in conjunction with the marketing department. After all, who better than faculty for telling students what their programs are about?

Our faculty agreed that we would accept marketing as one of our responsibilities. The problem was getting the high schools to invite us to tell their students about our college and what we had to offer. We needed a reason for them to want us there, and we created one—a typing contest! Because our main target audience was anyone who had typing/keyboarding skills, we were able to include all grade levels and speak to anyone who would listen to us about our contest and about our Office Administration program. (We realized that once we were in the school, students would have questions about other programs; someone from the college's marketing or admissions office joined our Office Administration group.)

One advantage of the contest was having the opportunity to work with the high school teachers directly: They work with the students on a daily basis; and the more they know about the Office Administration programs, the better.

We contacted a major supplier of college equipment, Olympia International, and asked that it sponsor the contest. Olympia agreed to support our effort and provided us with the first prize—an electronic portable typewriter. Second and third prizes—cash and/or gifts—were offered, as well.

### Format

The format of the contest was simple. We had four categories for participants: grade 9, grade 10, grade 11-13, and general public. While our contest was aimed primarily at high school students, we acknowledged that, with so many adults returning to college, it was important to include the general public. (This is a very "safe" way for some hesitant adults to return to school. Once there, they can receive information on other available studies.)

Because high school students enjoy competitive sports and work hard on team spirit, our contest was

well received. We awarded the winning school a beautiful trophy, which they kept for the next year. In addition, we awarded a Spirit Award to the school having the most participants.

### Advertising

The amount of advertising will depend, of course, on the budget. Sault College decided to involve the media by having a separate contest for them. The only prize awarded was a trophy for the best speed, but it served our purpose and earned us some media coverage, also.

### Evaluation

I shared this idea with a colleague from another college, and she conducted her first contest this year. Recently, she informed me that applications to their Office Administration program have increased by 29%. Our program, too, has experienced a significant increase.

Should you decide to hold your own contest, be prepared for a lot of involvement, hard work, and fun!

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*Suanne D. Rouache, Editor*

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