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Demonstrating the Power of Group Math

By PIPER FOGG

M. Vali Siadat Richard J. Daley College (Ill.)

The typical college student might balk at the idea of frequent quizzes that count toward his grade. But talk to students in the math professor M. Vali Siadat's classes, and you're likely to hear accolades.

"They helped me memorize more of the material for the tests," says Daniel M. Smith, a second-year statistics major who took an algebra class with Mr. Siadat last spring. "He was very specific, and if anybody needed help, he was available."

"The students know exactly where they are," says Mr. Siadat of his teaching approach, which he calls the Keystone method. He's the chairman of the mathematics department at Richard J. Daley College, part of the City Colleges of Chicago, and he first came up with the method as a topic for his dissertation more than 10 years ago. Students work in small groups with constant assessment, thanks to those frequent quizzes. The immediate feedback allows Mr. Siadat to respond quickly to students' weaknesses. And the group learning, he says, encourages cooperation while building critical-thinking skills.

"A lot of the kids were struggling in the class," recalls Mr. Smith of last spring's algebra course. "That's why the group work helped." The Keystone method typically places two weaker and two stronger students together so that they can teach and learn from each other.

The approach has won the professor more than just student praise: In 2005, Mr. Siadat was named Illinois Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. And in January, he was awarded the Deborah and Franklin Tepper Haimo Award for Distinguished Teaching of Mathematics.

Never before given to a community-college professor, the Haimo award — which is made by the Mathematical Association of America and is considered the highest teaching honor in the field — has gone to professors at Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of

Technology, and the University of Chicago.

"We view the classroom as a learning community," says Mr. Siadat.

"This concept is really important because it does away with mathematics anxiety and brings cohesiveness." He says the group work also gets students deeply engaged in the subject matter.

But while Mr. Siadat is proud of his method, he says the real prize is seeing mathematical concepts click with his students. "They are your academic products, your progeny," he says.

Mr. Siadat, who is, after all, a numbers guy, is perhaps most proud of one in particular — the number of students he estimates he has taught in his career: 10,000 and counting.

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