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Faculty Profile: Jean Prendergast

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Jean Prendergast is Bridgewater State's resident math guru. As Coordinator of the Math Lab, Jean is responsible for helping incoming students become more competent in their math skills. Every academic year Jean sees more than five hundred students enter the Math Lab hoping to overcome their deficiencies and fears in algebra and pre-calculus.

Since assuming the position of Coordinator in 1982, Jean has become part teacher, part adviser, part cheerleader and part advocate for mathematics. With a staff of three instructors and numerous student assistants, Jean patiently guides students through the FS 102 course, Freshman Skills in Mathematics, a no credit class designed to prepare freshmen to succeed in the regular credit courses in math. Students who take the FS 102 course have not passed the placement test given at their entry into Bridgewater State and are required to seek the services of the Math Lab. At present 20% of the freshman class will seek the services of the Math Lab.

While Jean expresses concern over the high level of math deficiency among incoming freshmen, she points with pride to the excellent success rate of the Lab - in two months of rigorous study and tutoring in the Lab, most of the students pass the first test and move on to the mainstream math courses. Jean's reward for the hard work of her team is the smiling faces of the students who pass the test and leave the Lab with a sense of accomplishment. While they may have come in as math “phobics,” they leave with greater confidence and self-esteem.

Jean’s leadership of the Math Lab has made her an activist for improving the teaching of math at the high school and college level. She is a director of the Mathematics and Computer Science Collaborative at Bridgewater State (MACS), which regularly brings teachers to the college to discuss strategies for strengthening math curriculums and developing better teaching methods. In March, 200 teachers from all over the state will come to the college to attend a series of workshops sponsored by MACS. Jean is also excited about the 11th annual MACSFEST which will be held June 4, 1997 at Bridgewater. MACSFEST is a larger gathering of mathematics and computer science instructors who will hear speakers, attend workshops and visit displays by publishers and technology companies. This year the theme of MACSFEST is “Mathematics and Your Career.”

Despite the problems associated with math phobia and general lack of interest in studying math while in high school, Jean retains a sense of optimism and confidence. In Jean's view, real progress is being made to develop basic math skills among incoming freshmen. However, Jean is concerned over a recent policy established by the Board of Higher Education in Massachusetts that states that no more than 10% of the student body in a state college can be enrolled in a developmental class. The policy, which goes into effect in September of 1997, will, in Jean's view, set up many freshmen to fail mainstream math courses and heighten the possibility of their failing out of college. After seeing the thousands of success stories that pass through the doors of the Math Lab over the years, Jean fears that too many students, who just need a little help in math, will not get remedial assistance.

But because Jean is a caring advocate for math at Bridgewater, it is a certainty that she and her Math Lab colleagues will continue to get freshmen "over the math hump" and into the mainstream. As Jean readily states, the rewards of seeing freshmen fighting their fears of algebra and pre-calculus are what teaching is all about.