

Program gives purpose to math problems

LMC takes new approach to teaching the discipline

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BENTON TOWNSHIP — Lake Michigan College math students are about to encounter a different instructional approach than they've experienced so far —

one that's not based around standard "x+y=z" equations.

LMC math instructors Peter Brown and Chris Bendixen have spent five years overhauling the program — along with Brenda Shepard, co-chair of the college's transitional studies program.

That effort began with the recognition of a common problem, as Brown and Chris Bendixen told

LMC board members last week.

"We saw the people coming in, seeing algebra for the 19th time, weren't very enthusiastic — nor were they really seeing any connection" to their own learning, Brown said.

In response, the department is rolling out a new approach of shorter lectures, collaborative work sessions, and — most importantly — an effort to present

problems in real-world terms,

"Much more what we ask now is, 'what does this mean?' — not, 'what are the steps involved?'" Brown said.

Instead of asking students to solve standard equations, they'll be asked to solve problems like this one: "If Grandma has \$40,000, and invests it in a mutual fund that pays 7 percent, how much will

she have after 40 years?"

Technology is also a major part of the overhaul, including databases, spreadsheets and use of online textbooks that fit the new approach.

"If you'd went to a math department meeting 20 years ago, they'd be arguing about, 'Should we have calculators?' We're going to stop all of that nonsense, and embrace technology," Brown said. "This is the real

world."

Other times, students will use traditional tools, like charts and graphs, but have to draw conclusions about the information they're given.

Bendixen used that approach in his own class, such as when he asked students to calculate the consequences of an unchecked epidemic of the lethal

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Ebola virus.

“When I first gave this problem in class, I had a student say, ‘Is this thing going to reach 7 billion?’” Bendixen said. “I said, ‘This guy gets it – seven billion (is the) population of the world.’”

Brown and Bendixen said they expect the final legwork of revamping the courses to finish this summer, including additional training to get adjunct instructors on board with the new approach, Bendixen said.

“It’s hard to get our adjuncts on board because they’re so used to doing things the old-school way. We have to convince them this is the way to go,” Bendixen said. “Every one of us in the math department believes that this is what’s going on.”

The sentiments got a thumbs-up from Trustee Paul Bergan, who said that approach suits his way of thinking.

“You guys should be congratulated for taking the idea of bringing things into reality, making them more practical, where math is not such a mystery, that no one but a few people can understand,” he said. LMC President Bob Harrison said that the math program overhaul is the next logical step after a recent modernization for the science department.

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