University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Biographies and Links -- ADAPT Program

ADAPT Program -- Accent on Developing Abstract Processes of Thought

4-27-2000

Mel Thornton's Legacy Is Teaching Corps

Mark Hattan
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

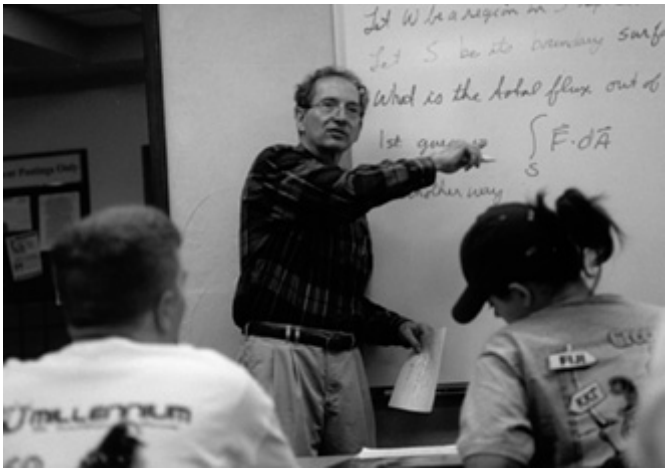
Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/adaptfaculty

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons

Hattan, Mark, "Mel Thornton's Legacy Is Teaching Corps" (2000). *Faculty Biographies and Links -- ADAPT Program.* Paper 2.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/adaptfaculty/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ADAPT Program -- Accent on Developing Abstract Processes of Thought at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Biographies and Links -- ADAPT Program by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

From the UNL Scarlet, April 27, 2000.
Online at http://www.unl.edu/scarlet/v10n16/v10n16features.html



Mel Thornton has spent 30 years teaching mathematics to future teachers.

Math Professor to Retire After 30 Years

Mel Thornton's Legacy Is Teaching Corps

By Mark Hatten, Arts & Sciences

After more than 30 years at the University of Nebraska, Mel Thornton is retiring from the Department of Mathematics and Statistics. The Spring 2000 semester will be his last.

Most of the state's elementary and secondary math teachers know Thornton. His decades-long tenure at Nebraska left its mark on math education. He taught graduate students, prepared teachers, and helped students meet the math requirements of their liberal arts education.

"I'll miss the interaction with the students," Thornton said. "I'll miss the excitement of seeing them discover some things."

Thornton came to Nebraska in 1969 after spending four years on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin. But he originally came to NU as an undergraduate student in 1953, when the campus had little resemblance to today's scene.

"Back then, it was different," he said. "Fourteenth Street actually went through, and there was a temporary building that was the bookstore."

Thornton also served in the Naval ROTC at Nebraska, and after graduation in 1957, spent three years in the Navy. He then went to the University of Illinois for graduate school.

Once he arrived at NU, Thornton taught a range of courses. He designed Math 203, Contemporary Mathematics, and was the first to teach it. The course is now required for all elementary school teachers, and seems to be the preferred math course to meet the liberal education requirement, Thornton said.

But Thornton's influence on teachers reaches beyond the Math 203 requirement. "Most every semester, I've taught at least one course that's aimed at certification of teachers. An awful lot of my students are secondary math teachers and elementary teachers."

Thornton has also taught the geometry course and graduate courses in topology, his technical specialty. Topology is an abstract study of how points are joined together. Thornton describes it as "kind of like geometry without the measurements."

In addition to developing courses for teachers and math novices, Thornton also has worked in other arenas. Sandy Scofield, director of the Center for Science, Mathematics, and Computer Education, said Thornton's skills and demeanor will be missed.

"He has organized successful conferences and other activities that have furthered the professional growth for K-12 math teachers and his colleagues in higher education," Scofield said. "I keep telling him that he needs to clone himself before we can let him fully retire."

Thornton was involved with the statewide systemic initiative grant which formed the Nebraska Math and Science Initiative. The $10 million grant from the National Science Foundation also allowed the initiative to produce the Math Vantage program, a 23-video series for students to utilize the year before they take Algebra 1 in junior or senior high school.

Thornton was also active in the ADAPT program and the associated Piaget workshop, "Science Teaching and the Development of Reasoning." ADAPT (Accent on the Development of Abstract Processes of Thought), began on the UNL campus in 1975 and remained for more than 20 years. ADAPT was a freshman program that emphasized reasoning and thought; students took courses in mathematics, English, physics, history, and economics.

Additionally, Thornton worked with the Nebraska Math Scholars Program and the Western Math Scholars Program. Lasting four and two years, respectively, the programs were National Science Foundation-funded teacher enhancement programs, and they had a major impact on the state of math education in Nebraska, Thornton said.

If after May you find yourself in northern Nebraska, you might happen across Thornton and his wife, Rosemary, in Niobrara River country. The couple have been building a log cabin near the Niobrara River a perfect site from which to indulge their enthusiasm for canoeing. The outside of the cabin is nearly complete, but Thornton says about two years' worth of interior work remain. Once the cabin is complete, the Thorntons will spend weekdays at the cabin and weekends in Lincoln