

Report on Activity Promoting Women in Mathematics

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Background

I proposed to hold a series of discussions at the Women's Center at Boise State University to discuss math anxiety and some of the practical applications of mathematics. The primary mission of the Women's Center is to support female students at Boise State University in their personal and academic development. The traditional student at Boise State is 25 years old, and many have jobs and families. Consequently, the most popular programs at the Women's Center are their Returning Women's Programs.

In order to promote relationships among re-entry women, the center regularly hosts a discussion group addressing issues relevant to these women. The coordinator of the center was enthusiastic when I offered to discuss math anxiety with this group because these women often discuss their frustrations with their math classes. After talking with the coordinator it became clear to me that most of these students were in algebra courses so I decided to only talk about math anxiety and not go into discussions about practical applications of mathematics.

Preparation

The presentation was directed toward returning women whom were taking math courses in algebra. Before discussing specific strategies for coping with math anxiety, I spoke a little bit about myself in order to give the students some perspective. The majority of the information about myself was about my family and personal life in the hope that once they found out I was a regular person, they would listen to my suggestions.

The strategies for coping with math anxiety in my talk can be simply outlined as:

1. Don't let math psyche you out.
2. There are different levels of understanding, and you need to move through all three.
 - (a) Understand the problem when someone else is doing it.
 - (b) Do the problem yourself with aids (books, teachers, other students).
 - (c) Do the problem without any aids.
3. Expect to get stuck on problems, but don't give up.

My talk included examples real-life examples (good and bad) and suggestions about how to accomplish these goals.

Results from the meeting

November 19, 2003 I gave a presentation at the Women's Center at Boise State University. Approximately 35 women were in attendance. After the presentation there was a luncheon and about 15 women stayed for a discussion. We began the discussion by going around the room and having each woman describe their major and their experience with math. Here is some of the feedback I received from the presentation:

“so I still have some hope for understanding math”

“that is why I don’t get As or Bs in math”

“since you don’t like cleaning your house and I don’t like doing math, let’s switch”

(this was in response to a comment I made about the fact that just because you don’t like math doesn’t mean you can’t do it)

In conclusion, I do not think I convinced any of these women to major in math however, I do have hope that I made their experiences in their lower level math classes better.