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NEWS RELEASE

Oct. 1, 2012

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Teacher of the Year winner credits advisor, Northwest for success

By Philip Gruenwald, media relations assistant

Northwest alumna Crystal Combs credits her advisor, Nancy Zeliff, a professor of mathematics, computer science, and information systems, with guiding her to take her Northwest education to the next level through professional development opportunities.

Using the skills she learned under Zeliff, Combs, a business teacher at Corning High School in Corning, Iowa, is now president-elect of the Iowa Business Education Association (IBEA). Recently, she was named New Business Teacher of the Year by the Iowa Association of Career and Technical Education (IACTE) and IBEA's New Teacher of the Year.

"I've been a member of all of those since college, thanks to Dr. Zeliff's encouragement," Combs said. "I really developed into a strong leader. I wasn't afraid to talk to people anymore, and I really came out of my shell. I attribute a lot of that to Dr. Zeliff."

As an undergraduate student under Zeliff's advisement, Combs served as president of Pi Omega Pi, the national honor society for business education majors. With Zeliff's encouragement, Combs joined the Missouri Business Education Association (MBEA) where she served as a student representative. As part of Pi Omega Pi, Combs attended a MBEA conference in New York City, where she witnessed classroom values in action.

"That's where students see what we talk about in class: how important it is to stay on the cutting edge of your discipline," Zeliff said. "They really see that in action because they're looked upon as a peer, they're asked for input, they make policy decisions and they represent other students across the country."

Combs received her undergraduate degree in business education in 2007. After two years of teaching, she returned to Northwest for her master's degree in instructional technology in education, which she completed in 2011. Today, Combs has taken her education, experience and professional development from Northwest to her current role as a business teacher at Corning High School, where she teaches business to students in grades seven through 12. There, she started a Future Business Leaders of America chapter, which quickly grew to 50 members. Over the past five years, the chapter has sent 40 students to the national conference.

Several of Combs' students have come to Northwest after graduating high school. Zeliff taught two of them in a computers and information technology course last year, which Zeliff said was similar to teaching her grandchildren – students taught by a teacher whom Zeliff taught.

"They had been her classroom assistants; they could have taught the class themselves," Zeliff joked. "The success that they had was because of her background as a teacher and the strong program that they had at Corning."

Northwest students in the business education program have been achieving excellence for years. Since becoming the Pi Omega Pi advisor in 1990, Zeliff has seen at least 20 students represent Northwest at state, regional and national levels. Northwest's chapter, which is the oldest active chapter in the nation, has been one of the society's top 10 chapters since 1990. Zeliff said she enjoys seeing students develop, and takes pride in guiding them along the way.

"Just like we've had students like Crystal in the past, what's exciting is I know there are more of them coming down the pipeline," Zeliff said. "Maybe they don't yet know it yet, but I can see something in them and maybe another little push will get them coming up quickly."

That "little push" was enough to guide Combs to the success she is having today. In the meantime, Combs remains a proud Northwest alumna, and promotes the University whenever she can.

"We have a lot of teachers at Corning from Northwest, and we do a lot of talking up of Northwest because it was a great experience," Combs said. "Everybody is so welcoming and friendly and the teachers are all there to help you. I always tell the kids, 'I liked it so much, I went back so I could go get my master's degree.'"



Crystal Combs, a 2007 Northwest graduate, recently was named New Business Teacher of the Year by the Iowa Association of Career and Technical Education (IACTE) and the Iowa Business Education Association's New Teacher of the Year. (Submitted photo)