IN SEARCH OF BEAUTIFUL IDEAS

Eric Scheidecker had glimpses of “what being a graduate student in the math department was like” during his regular visits to the math tutoring lab in the Department of Mathematics at the University of Northern Iowa. And he liked what he saw.

“I had heard good things about UNI’s math department while I was at Hawkeye Community College, and I knew UNI worked well with transfer students,” he recalls.

However, seeing graduate students at work in the math tutoring lab made his decision to enroll in the graduate program “a lot easier,” he adds.

Eric now feels the decision has returned rich dividend.

“My experience at UNI has been positive,” he says. “The math department is relatively small, so class sizes tend to be small and instruction more personalized.”

“My professor are enthusiastic about the topics that they teach,” he adds. “Their enthusiasm makes getting through difficult materials a lot more enjoyable.”

Thus far, Discrete and Argumentative Mathematics has been Eric’s favorite.

“Broadly speaking, the course is on basic proof-writing technique,” he explains. “You are given problems and the tools to solve them, and then you break into groups and argue about how to solve the problems.”

“You make presentations on a regular basis but it’s in front of the people you have been talking to the entire semester,” he goes on. “The experience has helped me in every math class that I have taken since.”

Eric also marks the research he has been involved with recently as a high point.

“I spent a few months doing research with a professor,” he recalls. “Working on new mathematics is strange as well as awe-inspiring for me.”

“Most of what I have learned until now is considered relatively recent even if it is a century old,” he adds.

How Eric spends his free time depends on how much free time he actually has. “I usually spend my free time reading or watching movies with my friends,” he says.

More often than not, though, free time is quite rare. How does he maintain a social life then? “Online gaming has been a good way to maintain a social life,” he replies.

Last spring, Eric was involved with the preparatory work for the UNI STEM Summer Camps; he found the experience both challenging and enjoyable.

“The work was almost never the same from week to week, and I had to learn some new skills on the fly,” he says. “It made me appreciate how much work happens behind the scenes to make these camps happen.”

Eric would like to pursue doctoral studies after he graduates from UNI and then teach at a community college.

“I probably wouldn’t be a math major if not for a few good professors at my community college,” he says. “Getting people to understand a beautiful idea and then come up with more of their own seems like a useful career.”

Eric’s advice for future STEM students is twofold. “Take some of the major’s core classes,” he says. “Find a professor to talk about the field you want to go into.”

He also feels students need to realize that they “aren’t locked into anything” and that “a rough semester doesn’t mean you can’t make it.”