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Computer Science Begins at Fisher

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Dr. Rev. Michael Costanzo asked me to write an article for Verbum 2012. I know Father Costanzo as my family is a member of the Church of the Holy Spirit in Penfield where Father Costanzo often helps out. I thought I would write a little about my experience at St. John Fisher College for the Alumni Corner. It has been over 30 years since I first walked onto the St. John Fisher College campus in the fall of 1979 as an incoming freshman, but it doesn't seem that long ago. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life as I entered college, but was excited about beginning college. It wasn't easy for me choosing a college when I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I was from Rochester and I chose Fisher because I decided to stay local, Fisher had a very good reputation in many different academic disciplines, and I liked the fact that, at Fisher, religion would be a part of the academic life. At that time, Fisher was mainly a commuter school with over 60% of the students commuting. There wasn't much dorm space at that time. A main reason I commuted was to save money. To this day I regret that decision as I didn't get the full experience of college life by living on campus. I came for my classes and immediately left after my last class each day to head to a part-time job or to return home."



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Computer Science Begins at Fisher

Dr. Rev. Michael Costanzo asked me to write an article for Verbum 2012. I know Father Costanzo as my family is a member of the Church of the Holy Spirit in Penfield where Father Costanzo often helps out. I thought I would write a little about my experience at St. John Fisher College for the Alumni Corner. It has been over 30 years since I first walked onto the St. John Fisher College campus in the fall of 1979 as an incoming freshman, but it doesn't seem that long ago. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life as I entered college, but was excited about beginning college. It wasn't easy for me choosing a college when I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I was from Rochester and I chose Fisher because I decided to stay local, Fisher had a very good reputation in many different academic disciplines, and I liked the fact that, at Fisher, religion would be a part of the academic life. At that time, Fisher was mainly a commuter school with over 60% of the students commuting. There wasn't much dorm space at that time. A main reason I commuted was to save money. To this day I regret that decision as I didn't get the full experience of college life by living on campus. I came for my classes and immediately left after my last class each day to head to a part-time job or to return home.

As I mentioned earlier, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life when I entered Fisher. I decided to declare a major in Math as that was my best subject throughout grade school. Before the fall semester, all incoming freshmen were invited to an evening orientation where they talked about all the various programs offered at Fisher. I was intrigued by one program in particular. There was no Computer Science department at Fisher then, but at the orientation they talked about a 3-2 program Fisher had with R.I.T. You would attend Fisher for three years as a Math major. Your fourth year would be spent at R.I.T. taking mostly computer science classes. After the fourth year at R.I.T. you would have earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Math from Fisher. After the fifth year at R.I.T. you would have earned a Master of Science degree in Computer Science from R.I.T. Fisher had a number of these 3-2

programs then as they didn't have any graduate degrees at that time. I didn't know much about computer science at the time. The only computer I had ever used was one we had in the guidance counselor's office in high school. It was only used to help students figure out what career path they might want to take after high school. I knew computer science was a huge up and coming job growth area so that led to my interest in the program.

The first computer class I ever took was an Introduction to Computers course taught by Father Poluikis who has now retired from Fisher. This was everyone's first experience with computers and he made the course fun as we first started to learn how to program a computer. Computers at that time were generally very large and could fill a room. I never actually saw the computer we worked on. It was in some room that wasn't within sight. We worked at terminals which didn't even have a computer screen. Whatever we typed went onto a piece of paper. We worked on the program and ran it until we got the desired result. We then turned in the piece of paper which contained our program typed on it and the results of running it. There was a lot of hand holding then as none of us had been on a computer before. Father Poluikis had to tell us every step that we needed to take when we walked up to a computer terminal. There were no computers in the class room so he would have to write each step on the board which we students would dutifully copy down and then take with us to the computer room. The class was so interesting and fun for me that I decided the 3-2 program with R.I.T. was something I wanted to pursue.

My plans changed after my sophomore year at Fisher. Between my sophomore and junior years, Fisher decided to introduce their own Computer Science degree. I decided to switch my major from Math to Computer Science and to stay at Fisher for my entire undergraduate time. I figured if I decided to continue on for a Master's degree I could attend R.I.T. after my undergraduate studies ended at Fisher. I liked Fisher and wanted to complete my degree there. I had only taken two computer classes my first two years in college so there were a lot of computer classes to take in my final two years. Along with the new Computer Science major at Fisher came many new course offerings and new teachers. Two teachers stand out in helping my transition from pursuing a mathematical degree to a computer science degree and both remain with the college to this day. Dr. Donald Muench was my faculty advisor, the head of the new Computer Science Department, as well as a math and computer science professor. I only had Dr. Muench as a teacher for one course during my studies at Fisher, but as my faculty advisor he helped guide me through the transition from math to computer science degree as well as general guidance throughout my time at Fisher until my graduation. The other teacher who stood out came to the college as the computer science degree was established my junior year. Her name was Ms. Elizabeth Leboffe. She was an immediate hit with her students. She

had decided on an academic career after spending a number of years in the business world. I don't remember how many years she worked in business before coming to Fisher, but it couldn't have been many as she wasn't much older than us students. I will always remember her infinite patience with her students. Remember, Fisher was the first time most of us had used a computer. Programming a computer was brand new. Students need a lot of help to get a computer program to work. PCs didn't exist. There was no Internet to find help. All we had was our professors. When assignments were given, there would always be a long line outside Ms. Leboffe's office of students looking for help in getting their program to work. There was no way of sharing our work via a computer. We had to bring a paper copy of our program to her office. She would patiently go through the program line by line with the student, helping them find what wasn't working and why. We'd then return to the computer room with the help we'd just received to continue on with the assignment. Grading the homework must have been quite a task too. Again, the only way we had to turn in our computer program was to turn in a paper copy. Ms. Leboffe would have to go through the copy, look for problems, and grade it without the ability to run the program. What I will always remember most was the trust and belief she showed in me. One time after coming out of a final exam I was discussing the exam with a fellow student. The other student asked me about one particular essay type question on the exam. I couldn't remember it and quickly realized it was on the back of the last page and that I hadn't answered the question because I hadn't seen it. I immediately returned to the classroom since the exam was still going on, explained to Ms. Leboffe the conversation I had just had with the other student, and that I thought I had failed to answer a question on the back of the test. She checked my test and saw that I hadn't answered the question. She asked me if I had discussed the answer with anyone and I said no. I told her my conversation with the other student had ended as soon as I realized I had not answered the question. There was still time before the end of the exam, so she allowed me to complete the test. I'm not sure how many professors would have allowed me to finish after leaving the exam room, but I'm still very thankful for the trust she showed in me that day.

I went on to complete my Computer Science degree at Fisher. I had many other terrific professors both inside the Computer Science and Math departments as well as outside those departments. Some of my favorite courses were the electives I took. Many students questioned why a college requires taking courses outside their major, but I found them interesting and found that they also helped in my career development. Since the Computer Science degree began in my junior year, I was one of only three students in the Class of 1983 that were leaving Fisher with a Computer Science degree. The other two students were part timers and I believe they still had course

work to take during the summer to complete their degrees, so my one claim to fame may be to have been the first student to have left St. John Fisher College with a Computer Science degree that May of 1983. I did go on to R.I.T. for graduate work. It took a number of years before I finally got around to completing my Master's Degree in Computer Science, but I found that my degree at Fisher put me on equal footing with the other students at R.I.T. that were working towards their Master's Degree. I was as prepared as anyone for the Masters level work. While I was attending R.I.T., I also found a job as a computer programmer at Eastman Kodak Company. I remember one of my first supervisors telling me that this was the first time they had hired someone with a Computer Science degree from St. John Fisher College. Most of their local recruits came from the University of Rochester and R.I.T. They hadn't even begun sending recruiters to Fisher. I had gotten my interview on the R.I.T. campus from a Kodak recruiter since I was attending graduate school there. I also remember my supervisor telling me that I would be sort of a test case for St. John Fisher. Since there was no history of hiring Fisher Computer Science graduates, Kodak wasn't sure how prepared Fisher graduates were for the work place and how they would fit in at Kodak. I would help define that preparedness. I must have done okay since in the coming years I saw a regular stream of Fisher Computer Science graduates hired by Kodak into my department.

I'm sure the Computer Science department has come a long way since the beginnings in the early 1980s that I have described here. PCs are everywhere and now we couldn't get along without the Internet available to us at all times. It's interesting that when I look at a list of the current faculty I still see many of my former professors even though it's been over 30 years since I attended my first course at Fisher. Not only is it a great place for students to attend, but it must be a great place for faculty to work. I enjoyed my time at Fisher. I left Fisher prepared to continue on my studies at the graduate level and to succeed in a competitive working environment.



John, son Chris, and wife Mariangela