



**November 10, 2011**

NR11115

# News Release

*Contact:*  
**Jason Parent**  
**Development and**  
**College Relations Office**  
33 Edgemont Drive  
Presque Isle, ME 04769  
Phone: (207) 768-2808  
Fax: (207) 760-1101  
jparent@nmcc.edu

## **NMCC instructor selected to speak at national education conference**

**Aroostook County** – As part of her mission to help students at Northern Maine Community College succeed in reaching their educational goals, Laura McPherson, coordinator of the College’s Academic Success Center, makes the most of all the resources at her disposal.

It is her work with one of those resources that led to her being invited to speak recently at the EdTech 2011 PLATO Learning Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. McPherson was approached by a representative of PLATO Learning to present her findings over the past three years regarding the effectiveness of the technology in improving test scores and class grades.

“My PLATO representative knew that I’ve been working with students to help them improve Accuplacer [placement testing] scores, which in turn helps them to enter academic programs. Without the recovery work done on PLATO, anywhere from 50 to 120 students a semester would not be able to enter the program of their choice,” explained McPherson.

PLATO is an online learning tool that has curriculum and assessment tools for elementary, secondary, school district and post-secondary teaching environments. It provides credit recovery solutions that contribute to the success of a person’s transition to a positive post-secondary experience. Courses on PLATO include algebra, basic math, trigonometry, English, literature, biology, earth science, space science, and much more.

“Being asked to speak at this year’s conference was an excellent opportunity to really showcase PLATO online learning and what a benefit it has been for our students. This program provides training in remedial areas such as math, and serves as an extra teaching tool for them to refresh their skills and improve academic performance,” McPherson said.

“I was trained on PLATO in 2007 and integrated it into my developmental classes that fall. I realized that this was a tool that could be utilized on a much larger scale. Students liked it, and it gave me more time to work with students on a one-to-one basis,” said McPherson. For a PLATO class, McPherson first meets with each student to create a plan and set goals. The student then works independently outside of the classroom for at least 10 hours a week, attends a weekly one hour class, and meets with the instructor once a week.

McPherson addressed a series of questions during her presentation: Can the use of PLATO be effective in supporting student improvement on Accuplacer scores? Are students who take PLATO math courses successful in college algebra or applied math courses? Are students who take PLATO writing and/or reading courses successful in English Composition?

As for the impact of PLATO on Accuplacer testing, which NMCC uses to determine a student's acceptance into an academic program, McPherson reported on statistics for each of the past three years, which indicate an average success rate of more than 96 percent. The number of students taking part in the program each year ranged from 128 – 147, and for those who took a second Accuplacer test after completing the PLATO program (ranging from 80-100), nearly all met the College benchmark. According to McPherson, many students start out with a score of below 15%, with the average percentage gain after PLATO of more than 40 points.

However, according to McPherson, those results are based on the College deviating from the prescribed curriculum and creating a more rigorous learning path for students. For instance, the Math Accuplacer Prep Course contains 38 modules, including four on percent and two on problem solving; NMCC's Basic Math Plato Course contains 76 modules, including nine on percent and six on problem solving.

As for the questions regarding student success in related classes after completing the PLATO program, McPherson reported that preliminary results are promising. Seventy-four percent of students who take PLATO reading and writing courses pass College English Composition, while 71 percent of students who take PLATO math pass College Algebra.

“From my perspective, this program helps students to improve their Accuplacer scores, improve their overall grade in a particular class, or help them brush up on skills for the TEAS exam [used to determine acceptance into the nursing program]. Having PLATO on our campus gives our students that extra edge, because they can complete this curriculum at home. It's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” said McPherson.

The PLATO online program is just one of the resources available to NMCC students. McPherson and her staff of tutors in the Academic Success Center also provide students with academic tutoring in person and online through Skype.

#####



*Laura McPherson*