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WCU Foundation receives North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation grant to support math teachers across region, state

CULLOWHEE – The Western Carolina University Foundation is the recipient of a \$200,000 grant from the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation that will be used to support the Smoky Mountain Math Teachers’ Circle, a professional development organization for math teachers in Western North Carolina, and to create a network of the organizations statewide.

Two faculty members from WCU’s Department of Mathematics and Computer Science organized the Smoky Mountain Math Teachers’ Circle in the summer of 2014, inviting middle school math teachers from Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon and Swain counties to join with WCU professors for an ongoing dialogue about math with colleagues and professional mathematicians. The grant will provide funding to sustain the Smoky Mountain group for the next five years and to take the concept across North Carolina.

“The Smoky Mountain Math Teachers’ Circle has proven a beneficial resource for the region, with an impact beyond education and teacher-student interactions,” said Sloan Despeaux, the WCU professor of mathematics who co-created and is leading the initiative along with her colleague, Nathan Borchelt, associate professor of mathematics. North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation board member Ran Coble noted “It’s great to see these counties in the western area of the state working with this important math education program.”

Despeaux and Borchelt created the Smoky Mountain Math Teachers’ Circle using a model from the American Institute of Mathematics. In addition to uniting the regional math education community in dialogue, the group engages middle and secondary teachers in problem-solving and provides support enabling them to promote open-ended problem-solving as a way of learning, thinking about, and practicing math in their classrooms. Participants meet six to seven times each school year, and also gather for a three-day summer immersion workshop.

In fall 2013, nearly 80 mathematics teachers, post-secondary educators and business leaders from the region attended the Western North Carolina P-16 Education Consortium Conference in Cullowhee. “One of the outcomes of this conference was a strong desire to increase opportunities for sustained partnerships between post-secondary faculty and in-service teachers within our region,” Borchelt said. “This is something that can certainly be achieved through Math Teachers’ Circles.”

The North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation is an independent self-funding 501(c)3 nonprofit organization supporting activities that help meet the educational and health needs of today's society and future generations. Since its creation in 1986, the foundation has granted \$67.4 million to support North Carolina projects and programs that emphasize the understanding and application of science, health and education at all academic and professional levels. Visit us at NCGSKFoundation.org.

For more information about the Math Teachers' Circle initiative at WCU, contact Despeaux at despeaux@wcu.edu or Borchelt at naborchelt@wcu.edu. More information about the Math Teachers' Circle concept is online at mathteacherscircle.org.

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