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RIT's math program creating institute to help fight terrorism

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HENRIETTA — The obvious weapons being employed in the "War on Terror" range from American troops in the Middle East to airport screening devices. Math is probably not something that comes to mind.

However, Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Mathematical Sciences is in the midst of creating an institute for counterterrorism to serve as a clearinghouse for research on mathematical issues with counterterrorism applications.

"Most people think of math, they don't really think about the applications," said Assistant Professor Bernard Brooks. "In the First World War, chemistry was the science that was important. In the second, obviously, it was physics. We've got a limited amount of resources (for counterterrorism). Math will tell us how to effectively employ those resources."

This year, RIT was a primary sponsor of the third annual Conference on Mathematical Methods in Counterterrorism, hosted in September by the Institute of World Politics in Washington, D.C.

Presenters at the conference included Richard Hoshino, a mathematician with Canada's Border Services Agency, who created a formula for flagging suspect cargo containers arriving in ports; and Nasrullah Memon of the Software Intelligence Security Research Center in Denmark, who developed an algorithm for finding hidden relationships in large communications networks, such as a terror cell communicating by e-mails and phone calls.

An institute revolving around the intersections of math and counterterrorism could help bring together people from different fields who normally never talk, along with people in the government, said Jonathan Farley, a Rochester native now with the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University.

"Mathematics is cheap," said Farley. "Aircraft carriers are several hundred million dollars. You need more rational people who are going to apply more logical techniques to try to work out allocating resources — the best way to secure the border, secure ports."

The counterterrorism institute will involve numerous higher education institutions, with RIT playing the lead, Brooks said. And organizing the annual conference will be one of its first tasks, he said.

The hope is to have the institute organized and put together by the end of the academic year, Brooks said.

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To learn more

For more on the Conference on Mathematical Methods in Counterterrorism, go to www.cmmc2006.org.

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