

From Port to Professor

Math instructor Rick Ferrin uses maritime experience to engage students

BY ANN MUDER ■ PHOTOS BY SCOTT S. SMITH

If you mapped out Rick Ferrin's career in maritime engineering, you'd find the starting point in an unusual place — the Panama Canal. About 30 years ago, as a member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Ferrin was getting his master's degree at Northwestern University when he got the call offering him an assignment as a civil engineer and senior project manager for the Panama Canal Commission.

"It was an incredible opportunity," Ferrin says. "Needless to say, I jumped at it."

That willingness to jump into new opportunities led Ferrin to a successful career, not just in maritime/port engineering, but later as an adjunct professor at Columbia College-NAS Jacksonville.

It was 1980, a time of transition, when he moved to Panama. Three years earlier, President Jimmy Carter and Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos signed two treaties that would hand over control of the canal from the United States to Panama by 1999. Because of those changes, Ferrin was the last U.S. Army engineer to serve with the Panama Canal.

As the transition played out in Panama, Ferrin's career was just beginning. His experience in Panama gave him significant experience in engineering in a maritime environment. He soon found himself in a senior-level position as deputy division engineer with the South Pacific Division Corps of Engineers where he oversaw navigation projects. Within a couple of years, he





was named director of engineering for the Port of Oakland, Calif., and in 1997, he was offered the role of executive director for the Jacksonville Port Authority in Florida.

In the middle of this busy career, Ferrin found another passion in teaching. In 1987, he was in Fort Carson, Colo., when a friend told him that a local community college was desperately looking for math instructors. Ferrin, who also earned a bachelor's degree from West Point before his master's degree from Northwestern, decided to give it a try. When he applied, they offered him a job teaching geology, much to his surprise. "They figured I'd know enough about geology that I could teach it."

He discovered that he enjoyed teaching and interacting with his students. So several months later, when he was stationed in California, he

looked for another opportunity and began teaching for Columbia College-Coast Guard Island. Later, when he moved to Jacksonville, Fla., he joined the Columbia College-NAS Jacksonville family.

After years of work in the public sector, Ferrin now works as vice president for TranSystems, where his focus continues to be the ports and maritime industry. But in the evenings he still finds time to teach math to military students in Jacksonville.

"It's something that I wanted to do once a week because it was extremely fulfilling to me," he says. "I enjoy getting to know the students. They are there night after night, week after week, trying to get an education. I enjoy being part of their lives, part of their education and part of what will be their success in the future." *a*