For the Love of the Game:
On the Field and In the Classroom

Growing up in a small, rural town in Pennsylvania if you would have told Len Annetta ’95, M’97 that he would be a tenured college professor he would have thought you were crazy.

In his youth, Len did well in school, but that was primarily so he could continue to play sports. That passion for athletics led him to Bloomsburg (PA) University where he played on the football team as a freshman. He had a good experience, but Bloomsburg was not the best fit for Len academically. Looking for a science program that was accredited by the American Chemical Society, he found that fit and transferred to then Salisbury State University. At first, Len was going to put football behind him and concentrate on academics, but he soon had a change of heart and decided to try out for the football team. Through his talent and competitive spirit, his collegiate football career culminated in becoming the all-time leader in passing yards at Salisbury. Len’s competitive juices also were flowing with his other passion, science. In 1995, he graduated with a degree in physical sciences from SU’s Henson School of Science and Technology.

After graduation, Len coached football collegiately for a few years before he came to the realization that being a good coach meant being a good teacher. This prompted Len to return to Salisbury where he enrolled in the inaugural Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) program. This was a year-long intensive program where those who graduated with a core degree could obtain a teaching certificate with a master’s-level degree. Under the guidance of Drs. Joel Jenne and Nancy Michelson, Len flourished in the program, learning HTML coding and PowerPoint, which laid the foundation for Len’s future research using technology. As part of the M.A.T. program, some courses were offered at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES). This portion of the program exposed Len and other M.A.T. students to underserved and diverse populations in the public schools. This experience made an impact on Len that would resurface later in his academic career.

Being a new high school teacher in Calvert County, MD, Len had difficulty getting his students to finish their homework. His biggest obstacle: video games! Instead of hiding from this worthy adversary, he bought a Sega Genesis and started to play games so he could relate to the students and devise a plan to engage them on their terms. Using the programming skills he learned at SU, he created simple computer games to help facilitate learning.

This newfound success catapulted Len’s interest in researching gaming further on the doctoral level. The impression that his M.A.T. experience left on him with respect to underserved populations and with gaming still fresh on his mind, Len wanted pursue this combination at the doctoral level. He was told by many faculty members that researching gaming would be “career suicide,” so he pursued his doctoral degree at the University of Missouri-Saint Louis researching various distance learning modes and their effects on underserved populations.

Once the defense of his dissertation was complete, Len interviewed at North Carolina State for a faculty position. During the interview process, he spoke freely about his passion for researching the effects that gaming would have on underserved populations. During his time at NC State, Len published various papers and publications on topics including gaming as a tool for teachers and how to teach students to create various modes of gaming for their own use. In 2008, Len received the NC State College of Education Outstanding Extension Service Award, was inducted into the Academy of Outstanding Faculty Engaged in Extension and was named the NC State University Distinguished Alumni Engaged in Extension and Outreach.

Len is now teaching at George Mason University and his continued research has gained his team millions of dollars in grants from the National Science Foundation. In addition, he was chosen to speak three times at the USA Science and Engineering Festival as a part of the Nifty Fifty Speaker series. Len has traveled the globe several times to conduct book signings and speak about his latest publications on gaming assessment and 3-D virtual learning environments.

As technology continues to evolve at a rapid rate, the impact on potential gaming research is exploding. With the educational foundation that Len achieved in the classroom and on the football field at Salisbury, he is prepared explore whatever theories come his way.