

Should Advanced Math Be Optional?

Advanced math is hard. It's keeping people from graduating high school and college. So, we should drop it.

At least that's what Andrew Hacker, author of *The Math Myth: And Other STEM Delusions*, argued in a recent interview with [NPR](#):

"I'm saying: No, we don't need that many people studying mathematics. We're shooting ourselves in the foot. One in five people don't graduate high school – this is one of the worst records of developed countries. And the chief academic reason is that they fail algebra... In our community colleges, [80 percent don't get a college degree](#). The chief reason is that 70 percent fail remedial math. And even in our four-year colleges, 40 percent don't get B.A.s [after 6 years]. And the biggest reason is they fail freshman math. We're killing our kids. We're destroying their futures because of this requirement. I think it's outrageous and we're doing a lot of harm."

Cutting advanced math out of curriculums is alarming to educators and math lovers alike. Hacker is fully aware his ideas are ruffling feathers, but he is adamant that there's a better solution.

His solution is replacing advanced math with classes in "numeracy," or being agile with numbers, which would give people the skills to, for instance, read a corporate report or a federal budget.

If the point of education is purely practicality, then Hacker's solution is a good one. Numeracy is almost certainly

a more useful skill for the majority of Americans than calculus. But, if that's the goal of education, then a whole lot of educational requirements can be dropped and liberal arts colleges can go ahead and call it quits now (my philosophy degree hasn't ever helped me make it through my day).

It is a shame that math is keeping people from finishing their schooling, and yet, that isn't necessarily a reason to get rid of it. Is there a value to the challenge of math, which Hacker dismisses as pointless rigor akin to enforced push-ups, that makes it worthy of learning despite it being a hurdle to graduation? And is it possible that students' inability to successfully complete math courses bespeaks an entirely different problem that won't be solved this way?

So, do we kill the math because it's killing students, or do we figure out why it's killing them?

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