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Not Just Pretty Numbers

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Saturday, November 8, 2008; A15

In the otherwise inspiring Oct. 13 Metro article "Scaling Summits: Advanced High School Math," it was unfortunate to see The Post perpetuate the distinction between "pure" and "applied" mathematics.

Supposedly, "applied" mathematics is used for problem-solving, while "pure" mathematics is studied "for its own sake, for its precision and beauty."

This is a myth. The most exciting developments in applied mathematics have always followed from the clever use of "pure" mathematics. Indeed, the subject discussed in the article -- complex analysis -- is not only one of the most elegant fields of mathematics, it is one of the most useful to engineers. Virtually all of advanced mathematics is both breathtakingly beautiful and surprisingly useful.

The perpetuation of this false distinction has adverse consequences for math education. If students learn to think of advanced math as "pretty but useless," they not only don't study it early on but they also carry forward the "I'm an engineer, just show me the formula" attitude that they must outgrow to succeed at the upper-division university level.

Advanced mathematics for engineering, science and finance is about structure and abstraction, not formulas and calculation, and our high-school teaching should reflect that reality.

-- Kevin Long

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