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Lives in reduced world

Doesn't understand his universe is devoid of the beauty as well as the power of mathematics

Feb. 21, 2006. 01:00 AM

When math does not add up

Opinion, Feb. 19.

Richard Cohen is distressed by the plight of a 12th grade high-school student in Los Angeles, who was, essentially, prohibited from graduating from Birmingham High School because she could not pass an examination in algebra. I concur with Cohen's inference that such measures are draconian; terminating a student's formal education because he or she is mathematically challenged harms both the student and society as a whole.

Cohen continues, explaining that he, himself, is totally inept in mathematics. He can do arithmetic, but cannot work out percentages.

Letters to the editor

We welcome your contributions.

Letters must include full name, address, and phone numbers of sender. Street names and phone numbers will not be published.

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We reserve the right to edit letters, which typically run 50-300 words. Photos are welcome.

Deaths In Memoriams



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He derides high-school math problems and extols writing as the highest form of reasoning. He does not seem to realize that the world he lives in is a world of mathematics. Even the eyeglasses he sports in the photo above his column would be impossible without the algebra governing diffraction of light. He could not even read the words he cherishes so much were it not that other people can do mathematics for him.

The truth is that Cohen is mathematics-blind. An entire modality is absent from his sensorium. However, rather than recognizing and confronting his disability, he endeavors to turn it into a kind of "norm of deprivation," much as some deaf people prefer to live in a community of silence.

The pathos of his situation, though, is that he cannot even recognize he has a disability. He does not really understand that his universe is devoid of the beauty as well as the power of mathematics and that he lives in a reduced world, akin to a world without music or a world in which flowers are totally absent, since, as he writes, you can live a "pretty full life" without them.

Kenneth H. Norwich, MD, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto

When math does not add up

Opinion, Feb. 19.

Richard Cohen, is right. There is life without math. There is also life without being able to read, to paint, to speak in public or to play music.

What is his point? That ignorance is bliss?

A diploma only has currency if it reflects a measurable competency. He is suggesting that math should not be a required competency. Others argue that literacy should not be required for high-school graduation. Then, high-school graduation becomes just a social rite of passage.

Employers and post-secondary educational institutions will have to develop other criteria to screen applicants, or, as often happens, they lower their expectations. Then we get journalists like Cohen who brag they cannot calculate a percentage.

Is his ignorance of math really a blissful feeling? Deep down, wouldn't he want to understand what is happening around him?

Mollie O'Neill, Toronto

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