

# Calculating the importance of math

BY BARB PACHOLIK, THE LEADER-POST NOVEMBER 16, 2009

Asked if math is still one of the most hated school subjects, Shaun Fallat admits the probability is pretty high.

When he gets on a plane and the conversation with his seatmate inevitably turns to occupations, Fallat can usually count on one of two reactions when he reveals that he's a mathematician.

"Either they put on their iPod immediately or they tell me about the horrific math teacher they had in Grade 7 that completely turned them off. I think only once have I had some meaningful conversation where someone said, 'I love math.' "

But the University of Regina professor and other math lovers say it's time to calculate the importance of mathematics in daily life during the province's first Mathematical Sciences Awareness Week, Nov. 15-21.

It's being held in recognition of the 10th anniversary of Mathematics of Information Technology and Complex Systems (MITACS), a Vancouver-based national research network that connects university math researchers with organizations to solve real-world challenges.

In an electronic world that offers instant stimulation, "it just seems that math is behind the times and students are easily turned off," said Fallat in trying to fathom math's bad reputation.

He noted the majority of people -- if pressed to take a math exam today -- would score at a Grade 6 level because their comprehension has dropped off after leaving school books behind.

Fallat, who has been teaching math since 1999, was especially surprised by a recent U.S. survey that found parents feel better equipped to talk to their children about drug abuse than math and science.

"People tend to forget about math, to ignore math, and yet it comes up everywhere," he said.

Over the years, Fallat has been asked for math help from a farmer trying calculate how to get the maximum volume from a water trough he was constructing; the City of Moose Jaw for advice on designing a survey; Saskatchewan Gaming when looking to calculate probabilities on a new game; and even an art gallery that had been directed by an artist to hang a painting with a certain ratio of space above and below the piece.

He hopes the awareness week will get people interested in honing their math skills.

"You want to get kids, parents, whomever thinking about things that are fun, but also mathematical and to make it exciting and get more kids into it," he said.

"We have so few kids majoring in mathematics, which is sad," he added.

Yet Fallat believes a math degree can open a lot of doors, including teaching, consulting, and work in

the fields of statistics and actuarials, used in the insurance industry. "We have insurance companies ... waiting to hire these aspiring actuaries."

To mark mathematics week, MITACS has a few suggestions: review the basics of math using such online programs as [math.com](http://math.com), [coolmath.com](http://coolmath.com), [mathplayground.com](http://mathplayground.com), or [mathamaze.com](http://mathamaze.com); strengthen problem-solving skills through games and puzzles; do activities that exercise logic, including puzzles such as Sudoku, Kakuro, and Kenken; play electronic games like Minesweeper and Lemmings to sharpen cognitive abilities; and read books that involve math.

For more information, check out [www.mitacs.ca](http://www.mitacs.ca).

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