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MATH BUILDS NECESSARY FOUNDATION FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

Do decimals and fractions leave you dizzy and confused? Do arithmetic and math throw you for a loop? Do algebra, geometry, percents and trigonometry seem like foreign languages? In a world growing ever more dependent on numeric calculations do you sometimes feel as lonely as a ship lost at sea?

“It’s not so strange that math leaves many folks feeling mystified and adrift,” said Sharon Gott, “because sometimes it seems like a mental exercise that exists only in our minds, with no concrete connection to the moments of our daily lives.”

As lead math instructor at Eastern WV Community and Technical College, Gott meets many students who tuned out of math in high school, put in just enough effort to get by, or dropped the subject altogether. “But now they’ve finished high school, and as they go looking for a good job, the job market is telling them that all those math skills that once seemed beside the point are exactly what employers need their workers to have.”

Jobs in business, accounting, computers and health care have always required workers to know math. Now, careers in criminal justice, communications, homeland security, marketing, video game design, political polling, professional poker and dozens of others all use math like a basic alphabet. “Mathematics has now permeated most walks of life,” noted Keith Devlin, a columnist for the Mathematical Association of America.

Truth Hits Home

That truth is beginning to hit home with Potomac Highlands students. At Eastern, for example, enrollment in refresher and pre-college math classes has doubled in the last two years. “Once students discover the direct connection between learning math skills and landing good jobs,” Eastern’s Gott said, “those who might have had trouble in high school math, or who never took it, or who studied it so many years ago that they’ve forgotten most of it, want to catch up.”

Gott, who received an ‘Outstanding Contribution to Community College Education’ award last year from the WV Community College Association, also serves Eastern as its Developmental Education Coordinator. In that role, she has designed the refresher classes that prepare learners for college-level math, and organized them for student success.

“Some of our students begin in Basic Math class or Introduction to Algebra, and then move into Intermediate Algebra and other college-credit classes,” Gott explained. For students who need extra attention, Eastern makes tutoring available at no charge.

“As a teacher of math, there are two important things I need to do,” affirmed Tom Shanholz, who earned a master’s in engineering from Johns Hopkins, taught two years at a college in Annapolis, and has stepped in this semester to teach a Basic Math class at Eastern. “Help get students past their fear of math, and teach the habit of practice. It’s like basketball: You can’t expect to go the foul line cold and shoot 80-percent. It takes practice.”

Math Is Necessary

Moorefield's Justin Myers started in Basic Math this spring. As a student in Eastern's Industrial Equipment Maintenance program, Meyers looks forward especially to the electromechanical component, and plans to continue his math learning beyond algebra and through calculus. "I don't like math," he said, "but I'll have to do a lot more of it for the electromechanical program."

Marie VanMeter, who also teaches Basic Math at Eastern, as well as Introductory Algebra and General College Math, sympathized. "You don't have to like math, but you have to get along with it."

In addition to teaching at the college level for almost two decades, "I've worked in the banking industry and in Internet services for quite a few years," she said. "And math has been important to all the careers I've been in."

Kimberly Alt, also from Moorefield, doesn't know what she wants to do after college, although a career in health care, perhaps nursing, interests her. "This is my first semester, and everything is really new," she said. Alt graduated high school in New Jersey, where she grew up, before moving with her father back to his native Moorefield. She chose to start college at Eastern "because it's local," she said, and had heard only good things about it. She also values the close, personal support Eastern offers students.

One-On-One Learning

"I'm not very good at math," she claimed, "and I'm starting tutoring next week." Alt will take advantage of Eastern's "Drop-in" tutoring program that runs all afternoon twice a week, providing students with one-on-one attention at their own scheduling convenience. "They also offer tutoring upstairs with Vera Shockey," Alt pointed out. Shockey, the Adult Basic Education Instructor for Hardy County, partners with Eastern's developmental program, and supplements the tutoring services available at the college.

And it's not just the tutoring services that Eastern students find important to their one-on-one learning: they give high marks to their instructors, too.

"Ms. VanMeter runs it down to a form that you can understand," said Michelle Turner, who moved to Moorefield recently from Green Springs, and plans to major in Early Childhood Development at Eastern as preparation for a career in social work and elementary education.

"She doesn't just do a hurry-up-go-through-it. She involves the class, and if you have any questions, she makes sure that you ask them, and makes sure a student understands what's going on even if she has to spend 20 minutes on a problem."

Linda Cerami agrees. "This class is great! It's the first math class I've taken, and I'm the type of person, if I don't understand it, I can't move to the next level. If you know how things work, it makes a lot more sense, and she explains it really well." Cerami needs only 24 credits—of which nine must be in math—to complete her associate in arts degree. After graduation, she plans to go into Information Technology.

Building Blocks

Wardensville's Camaron Shore, vice-president of Eastern's chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, the national academic honor society, started his math at Eastern last spring in Introductory Algebra, moved up to Intermediate Algebra last fall, and now takes College Algebra with Sharon Gott.

"I've had Sharon Gott through all of them," said Shore, who plans to graduate this June with both an associate in arts and an associate in science degree. "She explains things in ways that people can understand, and each class builds on another." After graduation, Shore plans to transfer to a four-year school for further studies in Computer Information Systems, which he hopes to combine also with business classes.

Students in Eastern's Introductory Algebra class also admire Instructor Gott. "Sharon Gott lays it down step-by-step, and her approach is really helpful," said Ariann Bradfield, who lives in Mathias and chose Eastern because of its convenient location and affordable tuition. "Right now I'm working on my associate degree as a Business Management major." Bradfield, who graduated from East Hardy High School last June, plans to go on eventually for a master's degree in business.

Strong Learner Support

Bradfield's classmate, Cindal Whetzel, also needs math for her Business Management program. "Math was a lot more difficult in high school than it is here," said Whetzel, who lives in Moorefield. "There are so many people here to help you with it. We have teachers who actually sit there and help you, and we have tutors too."

Whetzel also chose Eastern for its convenience and affordability, and she also singled out the college's learner support services. "You have your own counselor for your class schedule, and advisors who help you choose the classes you need, so you don't take the ones you don't need." After graduating from Eastern, she plans to earn a second degree in Communications.

Serving the residents of Grant, Hampshire, Hardy, Mineral, Pendleton and Tucker counties, Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College is a comprehensive and equal opportunity community and technical college bringing the resources and assets of Education That Works to the families, communities and employers of the Potomac Highlands.