

# The Stanford Daily

# News

## Math 15: Fuzzies' Logic

February 5, 2008

By Roxna Irani

Stanford is a place of surprises — even not-so-delightful ones, like when you think you will never have to take another math class after high school, but then those techie “GERs” come along and inform you that unless they are fulfilled, you simply can’t graduate!

For all of you out there for whom math isn’t second nature, revel in the joy that you are definitely not in the minority. For those who had to tread through Math 19 or Stats 60 to fulfill that math GER, remember, you can proudly brag that you actually took a math class at



#gallery <http://daily.stanford.edu/image/full/8474>

COURTESY OF RICHARD RESSMAN

Stanford. And for those of you procrastinating with getting the Math GER out of the way, this is one time your procrastinating will actually pay off!

Math 15 “Overview of Mathematics,” due to be offered for the second time next year, is a class that fuzzies across campus have unanimously loved.

And it’s largely because of Professor Keith Devlin, Consulting Professor in the Department of Mathematics, who received the Carl Sagan Award for “making math fun for non-techies.”

That’s right. FUN!

According to The Stanford Report, Devlin’s Math 15 class is designed to be “extremely valuable in preparing young people for life in today’s society.” The course is targeted at non-science majors and is designed to provide a broad survey of the nature and role of mathematics in society.

“This class is a study of math from a cultural perspective, one very different from regular math courses,” Devlin said. “The students have to do some problems, though I try to make it as unlike high school math as possible.”

Jesse Wallin '08, a Religious Studies and International Relations major who took Devlin's Math 15 class last year as a fun alternative to fulfill the math GER, was no exception — he truly enjoyed Devlin's style of teaching.

“Devlin has the unique gift of making mathematics relevant and tangible to demographics that typically find math abstract and not particularly important to their day to day lives,” Wallin wrote in an email to The Daily. “Devlin brings the world of mathematics alive to students who are used to viewing math as simply numbers and equations instead of as an all-encompassing tapestry which weaves together many aspects of life we take for granted.”

Last year was the first time that Devlin taught the class within the span of ten weeks instead of over an entire semester. Although this reduced the frequency and duration of discussion sessions, students seemed to enjoy the open communication that Devlin facilitated, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Lisa Kerner '09, an English major, enjoyed Devlin's unique teaching style and the distinct effort he made to interact with his students.

“Devlin's goal for the class was to break away from the high school mentality of rote memorization and encourage a more analytical thinking about mathematics, and to ultimately expose us to math's innumerable applications in the everyday world, from linguistics to DNA profiling to solving crime,” she said. “I have always despised math, mostly because I've never been great at it and found it rather dull, but I honestly looked forward to attending lecture every day and feeling a little less math-illiterate each time.”

The course included weekly quizzes, one for each chapter of the class 'textbook,' Devlin's piece of literature centered upon the mathematics behind the TV show “NUMB3RS.”

“Although students initially didn't like the quizzes, at the end, nearly all of them agreed that they wouldn't have got the same out of the class without the quizzes”, Devlin said. “More than a test of their math, it was a good way for students to really understand the reading and for me to gauge their areas of interest and potential for improvement.”

The small classroom allowed Devlin to maintain a close interaction with his students, giving them personal attention to help make up for “six to eight years of math education they didn't enjoy.”

“Quizzes tell me what my students don't understand; interaction tells me why,” Devlin said. “I'm talking to an audience that doesn't like math; chatting regularly with them is therefore critical to help make the material I teach interesting.”

“I love math and I get a lot of joy from conveying that love to other people, especially to students who have not all been taught by people who love the subject” Devlin said. “I have ten weeks to convey that enthusiasm and although I have big ambitions for the course, the students are the ones that can really make the biggest difference, especially if they get to know you well.”

Both Wallin and Kerner highly recommended Devlin's class.

“I think Devlin's passion for math would be a positive, eye-opening experience for every student, whether

they enter the class loving math or hating it,” Kerner said.

“Devlin’s unique teaching style quickly endears you to material you’ve never before embraced.” Wallin added. “I would absolutely recommend Professor Devlin’s class to both ‘fuzzies’ who are math-averse and ‘techies’ who would like to gain a different perspective on the world of mathematics.”

Although the class isn’t being offered this year, Professor Devlin is hoping that he will have the opportunity to teach it twice next year, both in the fall and winter. So for all you non-technies out there waiting to fulfill that math GER, this is the perfect opportunity to do so!

### Comments for "Math 15: Fuzzies' Logic" (0)

---

#### More articles

« **Previous article:** Law writer dishes on 1st Amend.

**Next article:** Bronco busting

