

As this issue of *Peer Review* goes to press, America is entering the final throes of the 2004 presidential campaign. Accordingly, we are beset by public opinion polls and by data-driven arguments about the relative merits of various policy alternatives. Our choices as voters may depend, in part, on our ability to sort through competing claims rooted in quantitative measures. Yet while its direct relevance to democracy may be more readily discernible in an election year, quantitative literacy—or “numeracy,” as it is sometimes called—has become increasingly important to citizenship more generally. Indeed, effective participation in civic life depends more than ever upon one’s ability to understand quantitative information and to make informed decisions based upon it.

Citizens are regularly confronted with a dizzying array of numerical information. On a given day, for example, the media may report changes in the consumer price index or federal interest rates, results of clinical trials, statistics from an educational assessment of local schools, findings from a study of the long-term health effects of a widely used product; the list could go on almost endlessly. Moreover, near-omnipresent computers generate—and the Internet makes available—a staggering amount of information, much of it quantitative.

For a quantitatively literate citizen, access to this wealth of information is potentially empowering. The reverse also is true, however. A quantitatively illiterate citizen—one who is unable to evaluate statistical arguments competently, for example, or incapable of grasping the potential implications of data trends—may be easily mystified. As Lynn Steen has put it, “an innumerate citizen today is as vulnerable as the illiterate peasant of Gutenberg’s time.”

As the economic and social effects of globalization continue to transform our notions of citizenship and broaden the opportunities and the need for responsible engagement, colleges and universities are working to strengthen the historical link between liberal education and civic engagement. There is also still much work to be done to help students see the important links between what they learn in college and their current and future lives as citizens of a diverse and globally-interconnected society.



Understanding the relationship between quantitative literacy and mathematics is a vital first step for curricular reform efforts, for efforts to inform students about important outcomes of college, and for attempts to clarify definitions of college readiness. Quantitative literacy is not a watered-down version of mathematics, and neither is it a replacement for mathematics; students need both. And as with writing or

critical thinking skills, responsibility for helping students to develop quantitative literacy must be shared broadly across the curriculum.

This issue of *Peer Review* offers a primer on quantitative literacy in college today. In these pages, among other things, you’ll find definitions, arguments for the importance of quantitative literacy, discussion of its relationship to mathematics, and different models for developing it. And yes, you’ll even find some data, statistics, and other quantitative information about it.

—DAVID TRITELLI

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