

New program offers free education in critical STEM field

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Southern Maryland students in grades six through 12 have a new local resource to learn mathematics, beyond that taught in the classroom. The Southern Maryland Math Circle is expanding access to higher learning and offering mathematics-enrichment opportunities—free of charge, no registration required.

The program is hosted by the St. Mary's College of Maryland Department of Mathematics and Computer Science and will take place at the Lexington Park Public Library. "Public school math teachers are under enormous pressure to cover easily testable skills and there's a lot of cool mathematics being squeezed out of the curriculum," said Professor David Kung, who is heading the program. "We wanted to provide a space for middle and high school students to explore fascinating problems without the pressure of a high-stakes test." To offer the program as a free resource to the community, Kung reached out to and was granted start-up funding by The Patuxent Partnership, an organization that works with government, industry and academia on initiatives in science and technology. "We are thrilled that we found partners who are able to help us do this," he said.

The Math Circle will meet monthly at the Lexington Park Library beginning Saturday, Nov. 15, from 10 a.m. to noon. Each meeting will be run by a St. Mary's College faculty member who will be aided by one to two St. Mary's College students majoring in math. The program, says Kung, is designed for students who find mathematics interesting and who are seeking new challenges.

On what students can expect by joining the Math Circle, Kung said, "We will throw out open-ended problems that will not be obvious to solve. It also won't be clear as to what type of mathematics to use. We'll keep going until we've explored some really interesting, deep results." Kung says he wants the Math Circle to spark motivation and curiosity that students will take back to the classroom. "We see the Math Circle as working in concert with K-12 teachers."

Math Circles have sprung up across the country and starting one for the Southern Maryland community, Kung says, was essential. "We [St. Mary's College] are a public institution and our mission is to serve the public. The biggest part of that mission is to educate college students, but we see outreach like this as an important part of our job as a higher education institution." The need for after-school STEM-related programming cannot be overstated, as occupations in STEM fields continue to grow 1.7 times faster than non-STEM occupations through 2018. (See "The Case for STEM Education as a National Priority," recently released by the STEM Education Coalition.)

Kung says he hopes that with fall sports coming to an end, students will have the extra time to participate in the program. The program's schedule will also accommodate the upcoming holiday season. After the first meeting on Nov. 15, the second and third are planned for early December (the 6th) and mid-January (the 17th). When asked what students should bring to the meetings, Kung said, "They should bring their minds and have them open."

For more information on the Southern Maryland Math Circle program, please contact Professor David Kung at dtkung@smcm.edu.

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