Fortune editor: Math key to nation's future

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ORONO - A Fortune columnist who spoke Wednesday about globalization discussed what it may be for future generations of American workers.

Geoffrey Colvin, senior editor at large for the national business magazine, said the question is not so much whether America can compete in the global economy but whether Americans can compete.

Judging by America's declining dominance of the world economy, he said, the answer for some obviously is "no."

Colvin was Wednesday's keynote speaker at Paper Days 2006, the annual pulp and paper industry symposium sponsored by University of Maine's Pulp & Paper Foundation. He said there are at least two things people should remember when considering the future of America's workforce.

It is not only manufacturing jobs that are moving overseas, he said, and science and mathematics are crucial to any nation's economic success.

"There's no reason to expect it to stop," he said of America losing jobs to places where it is less expensive to live. "The boundaries are constantly being expanded."

Not all the manufacturing jobs lost in America are reappearing elsewhere, Colvin said. The number of manufacturing jobs is shrinking everywhere - even in China - because advances in technology are enabling manufacturing companies to make more with fewer people.

Though more global manufacturing is moving overseas, he said, there is anecdotal evidence that even professional, highly technical services are moving to countries where the cost of living is cheaper. Some Britons get dental work done in Poland rather than going to dentists at home, and even Americans are flying to India to take advantage of cheap surgical procedures that are performed by American-trained doctors in new, state-of-the-art hospitals.

"It's less expensive than having it done over here," Colvin said.

Communication costs are in "free fall," he said, which makes it easier for information-based jobs to relocate and even for some tasks, including surgery, to be done remotely via computer.

More foreign students are choosing to stay in their home countries to get higher educational degrees rather than getting them in the United States, and those that do get such degrees in America more frequently are returning to their home countries when they are done.

America's 70,000 engineering students are less than one-quarter of the number of engineering students in India or China, he said. Countries that have done well economically have done so because of advances in math and science - a fact that does not bode well for America's future position in the global economy.

"This has been the case for the past 300 years or so," Colvin said.

The way to fix this is to integrate more science and math learning in American students at the

elementary and high school level. But before that can happen, there has to be a greater desire for scientific education.

To succeed, the desire for more scientific education will have to overcome a certain segment of American society that flaunts a boorish attitude toward learning, such as people who display bumper stickers that claim their child can beat up honor-roll children, he said.

"It's the whole culture that's involved here," Colvin said.

Colvin weighed in on other, related issues. Western Europe, he said, likely will have a "traumatic" time adjusting to the global economy because of its history of relatively short work weeks and generous pensions.

Americans should be proud their country has opposed foreign dictatorships, which are "lousy" for economic development, he said, but the fall of many such dictatorships does not mean that the world still cannot be a better place. And it is good Americans seem to be willing to find ways to use energy more efficiently because energy costs are not likely to decrease soon.

"We're in a world where it's going to be expensive long-term - more expensive than it has been," Colvin said.
