

Committee on the Profession Highlights

October 2-3, 2004

O'Hare Hilton Hotel, Chicago

The Committee on the Profession (CoProf) discussed recommendations from the final report on the focused planning effort on membership that were presented to the November 2003 ECBT. Specifically addressed were those recommendations that could be carried out by staff over a period of several years. Details on several new initiatives in 2004 that are steadily improving member recruitment and retention efforts were also shared. It was noted that initiatives requiring approval by the Board of Trustees and Council have also made progress in the past year.

At the request of the Chair of the AMS Council Subcommittee on Fellows, Henri Gillet, CoProf examined the responses to and comments on a member survey on creating an AMS Fellows program. It was noted that opinion is divided on this issue with good arguments in favor of and opposed to such a program. After a lengthy discussion of the difficulties inherent in starting a Fellows program, a member of the committee suggested a solution: choose only individuals with relatively recent PhD degrees (e.g. in the 21st century). This suggestion led to a more optimistic assessment of the prospects of a Fellows program. CoProf concluded that a transition plan is of critical importance and suggested that the development of such a plan may be the most appropriate first step for the Council Subcommittee to consider. CoProf looks forward to more information as the AMS Council Subcommittee on Fellows studies this issue further.

In its report to CoProf, the subcommittee charged with the review of the Society's activities in the area of employment issues and opportunities made three recommendations. The recommendations were that the AMS: 1) collect data on postdoctoral positions and on the transition from postdoctoral positions to tenure-track positions, 2) aggressively advertise the MathJobs.Org service to mathematics departments, and 3) continue to collect information about jobs for mathematics majors on a regular basis. The Committee accepted the report with thanks and noted that the AMS staff is currently moving in the direction of the subcommittee's recommendations.

CoProf observed that the 1994 Council Statement on Employment of Young Mathematicians could benefit from reconsideration and updating. The Committee agreed that, if charged by the Council, CoProf will appoint a subcommittee to review the statement and recommend changes in wording where appropriate.

The Committee explored various aspects of the "pipeline" issue as seen within the mathematical sciences. Specifically, members discussed whether there is a "pipeline problem" in mathematics or if there is one looming down the road, how the pipeline issue in mathematics differs from that of other disciplines, and what is the proper role for the AMS in discussions of the pipeline issue. CoProf anticipates the need to craft a useful principles statement, expressing what is important to our community, to be directed to both the NSF and mathematical sciences departments. The CoProf Chair and AMS staff has been charged with determining how to proceed.

At the request of President Eisenbud, CoProf discussed a possible AMS project growing out of the findings and recommendations of a National Science Board Committee on Education and Human Resources workshop entitled, "Broadening Participation in Science and Engineering Research and Education". The Committee will recommend to the January 2005 Council that the AMS highlight two programs per year that: 1) aim to bring more persons from under-represented minority backgrounds into some portion of the pipeline beginning at the undergraduate level and leading to advanced degrees in mathematics and professional success, or retain them once in the pipeline; 2) have achieved documentable success in doing so; and 3) are replicable models.

Prompted by recent member inquiries received by the Executive Director and the Secretary, CoProf discussed the issues surrounding the evaluation of the professional accomplishment of mathematicians. Of special interest is the evaluation outside the math community by deans, provosts, university promotion and tenure committees and the confusion that can result from the difference between mathematical practice and that in most sciences. CoProf agreed to inform the Council of its intention to develop a series of "information statements" on the culture of research and scholarship in mathematics, statements that would be readily available on the AMS website and backed by relevant data that the Society can accurately obtain. Two examples that CoProf saw as useful and uncontroversial were a) the practice in mathematics of listing authors, including the predominance of alphabetical order in most subfields, and b) the (low) number of PhD students supervised by non-tenured mathematicians and the role of PhD students in a mathematician's research program.

The Committee selected the Society's activities to increase participation at all levels of under-represented groups (e.g., women, African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, native Americans) as the topic of the coming annual review. This subject was last reviewed in 1995. A subcommittee will be formed to conduct the review.

CoProf will hold its next meeting on September 24-25, 2005 at the Chicago O'Hare Hilton.

Jim Maxwell
November 1, 2004