

# Rochester Update

The University of Rochester is feeling the heat of the public outcry over the elimination of its graduate program in mathematics. In a tartly worded memorandum, the administration proposed a plan whereby the graduate program would be restored, but only if other departments chipped in to pay for it. The Mathematics Department, emboldened by the strong support it has garnered outside the university, firmly rejected the proposal.

The story began last November, when Rochester unveiled a downsizing plan that called for deep cuts in the Mathematics Department. The Ph.D. program would disappear, the faculty would be reduced from twenty-one to ten, and adjuncts would be hired to teach lower-level courses. The university has received about one hundred letters from mathematicians, scientists, engineers, and industrialists protesting the cuts. The controversy has also sparked coverage in the popular press.<sup>1</sup>

In a memorandum sent in January to selected department chairs, the administration proposed a way to test the contention, set forth in many of the letters of protest, that a mathematics Ph.D. program is essential to successful science and engineering programs at a research university. "If that contention is correct," the memorandum says, "then we believe nonmath departments should be willing to contribute financially to a Ph.D. program outside their department that will prevent their own research from becoming inferior." If science and engineering departments put up the funds, then the administration would agree to a "focused" Ph.D. program run by thirteen mathematics faculty.

The proposal also outlined a mini public relations plan, in case the funds were not forthcoming. First, the Mathematics Department would have to issue a joint press release with the administration conceding that the other de-

partments did not believe that a graduate program in mathematics is essential. In addition, the department would have to agree to "acknowledge this point in any external communications that it makes thereafter critical" of the university's decision. Finally, the proposal includes a draft statement from the "Mathematics Department Leadership" that the department would have to adopt, saying that the administration had "read relevant faculty sentiment more accurately than we have and that its action is consistent with a rationally held belief that, given financial constraints, this action was institutionally sound."

In reply, the Mathematics Department flatly refused to make any such statements and rejected the entire proposal as a "plan designed to fail." They pointed out that the original downsizing plan stated that decisions about which programs to cut had to come from the administration, not from a collective decision of the faculty. "We find it inconsistent that you are now proposing that the faculty make these decisions in such a way that the deck is stacked," the department wrote. In addition, recognizing that other departments suffered cuts in the downsizing, the department declared, "We are sympathetic with their reluctance, and in some cases their inability, to volunteer further cuts." In another memorandum, this time to the entire faculty, the administration said that the department's refusal of their proposal "means that this specific claim of value [of the mathematics Ph.D. program] will not be tested, but the fact that they did not wish us to test it remains valuable information."

By mid-February, the acrimony seemed to have cooled. "We are not near a solution," said Mathematics Department chair Joseph Neisendorfer, "but now it's more civil." At the time of this writing, some headway had been made in the negotiations, though nothing could be made public. But one thing is clear: the off-campus outcry has given the department a powerful bargaining chip.

—Allyn Jackson

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<sup>1</sup>Two articles in the March 1996 issue of the Notices provide more background, as does the e-MATH web page <http://www.ams.org/profession/rochester.html>.