

Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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ABOUT THE COVER

Aperiodic tilings are the subject of the article beginning on page 416. This portion of a kite and dart tiling was made by Chaim Goodman-Strauss and William Schelter.

The American Mathematical Association

Why does American mathematics need a second professional organization? Most American Mathematical Society members would probably agree that they already belong to a society which "stimulate[s] interest in mathematics by providing expository books and articles on contemporary mathematics and on recent developments at the frontiers of mathematical research, and by exchanging information about important events in the mathematical world," as the Mathematical Association of America describes itself. On the other hand, MAA members could just as easily feel that they already belong to an association which "fulfill[s] its mission with programs that promote mathematical research, increase[s] the awareness of its value to society, and foster[s] excellence in mathematics education," as the AMS describes itself. Wouldn't there be some synergies and economies of scale in a merger/acquisition creating a powerhouse 50,000-member American Mathematical Association that could speak with one voice for mathematicians employed in American higher education?

Like Time/Warner and Disney/ABC, an AMS/MAA merger would inevitably involve certain clashes of organizational culture: the AMS tradition of at-large governance is at odds with the geographically based MAA system, for example, and economies of scale also means staff downsizing. But from the membership point of view, it certainly seems worth doing.

There is a reason, of course, that no such merger has taken place, and that is found in the conflict between research and teaching. I hasten to add that there is no theoretical conflict between teaching and research and that all mathematicians are sincerely interested in mathematical discovery, mathematical understanding, sharing mathematics with colleagues and students, and nurturing student mastery of mathematics. Part of being a real mathematician is thinking mathematics is so important that you want to spend a lifetime learning it yourself, and anything you think is that important you're certainly going to work hard at getting others, especially students, to understand and master also.

But not all of us get to hold these values in the same environment. To restate the obvious, most American institutions of higher education fall into two broad clusters: research institutions, which require their employees to do research and make time for it by limiting their teaching assignments, and teaching institutions, which require their employees to have a high level of student contact and make time for it by limiting or eliminating their research time. The working conditions of faculty in these two kinds of institutions are hardly the same, and the support and development aid they need from a professional organization is quite different. Generally speaking, the AMS has taken on the task of representing the faculty at the research institutions and the MAA of representing those at the teaching institutions, and, generally speaking, both have done it successfully.

Could a merged organization do as well? Probably not. Despite the theoretical continuity of research and teaching in the mathematical career, the practical needs for representation really require (occasionally conflicting) voices from both institutional communities. But there is an option. AMS members who work in the research world can join the MAA and, besides receiving the membership benefits of publications and meetings, thereby express their solidarity with mathematicians from the teaching institutions. MAA members can express their solidarity (and receive the membership benefits) similarly by joining the AMS. About 7,000 mathematicians are members of both organizations; many more of us should be.

—Andy Magid