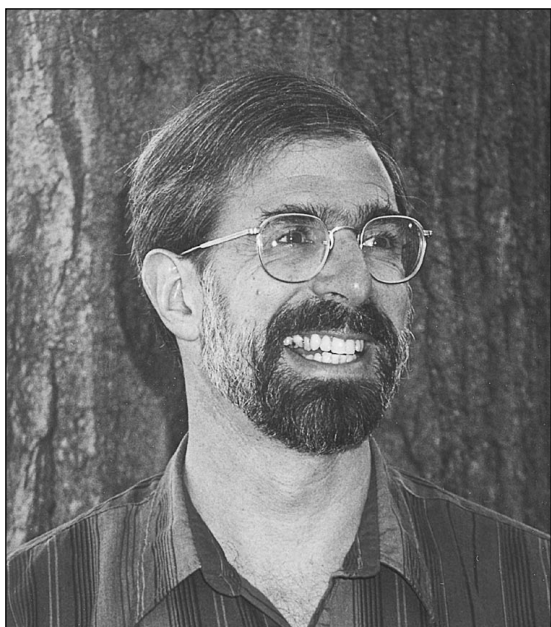


Eisenbud Named MSRI Director



DAVID EISENBUD of Brandeis University has been appointed as the director of the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute (MSRI) in Berkeley effective July 1. He succeeds William P. Thurston, who served five years as MSRI director and is now on the faculty

of the University of California, Davis.

Eisenbud received his Ph.D. in 1970 from the University of Chicago, where he was a student of Saunders Mac Lane and J. C. Robson. He has worked in noncommutative algebra, singularity theory, and knot theory and currently works in the areas of algebraic geometry, commutative algebra, and computational methods. He has spent his academic career at Brandeis, with visiting positions at Harvard University, the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, the University of Bonn, and the Henri Poincaré Institute in Paris. In 1986–87, Eisenbud was a visiting professor at MSRI. In addition to becoming director of MSRI, he has also been appointed as a professor in the mathematics department at Berkeley.

This is a somewhat precarious time for MSRI. Its primary funder, the National Science Foundation (NSF), has announced a new competition for the mathematics institutes it funds: MSRI and the Institute for Mathematics and its Applications at the University of Minnesota (see “Recompetition of the NSF-Funded Mathematics Institutes”, *Notices*, January 1997, pages 33–36). What this means is that Eisenbud will spend his first six months as director writing a new proposal for MSRI. He plans to “collaborate with

many people, because I think it has to be a proposal with broad support to be successful,” he says. The NSF has formulated the recompetition in such a way that a wide variety of contenders could enter the race, so Eisenbud says he is taking it “very seriously”. “On the other hand, I think that MSRI as it is has a spectacularly good track record and broad support in the mathematical community,” he notes. The current grant for MSRI will run until 2000.

Overall, Eisenbud does not plan to alter the fundamental aims of MSRI. The quality of the fundamental research programs will remain the primary focus. “There are certainly variations on [the programs], and I’ve been at some that were more successful than others,” he says. “But by and large I feel that they’ve been just great, and that’s what I want to maintain, first and foremost.” One area he plans to work on is insuring that postdocs who come to MSRI benefit from contact with senior mathematicians. The postdoc presence at MSRI has always been very strong, but sometimes programs have suffered from lack of participation by senior people. The solution is for organizers to think more about how to foster relations between junior and senior people, Eisenbud says. Also, “it probably means paying the senior people a little better,” so that MSRI can attract a wider range of senior mathematicians rather than relying, as it often has in the past, on the serendipity of who happens to have a sabbatical.

Without diverting the focus from mathematics research, Eisenbud would like to increase the attention MSRI pays to mathematics arising outside the field itself, perhaps with weekend workshops on mathematical topics from industry. MSRI has already held workshops in areas such as mathematical finance and computational mathematics. “I don’t expect to change the mix in a fundamental way,” he remarks, “but I do want to open the door to peo-

ple from industrial places.” He is also starting to work on forging links with Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, which is just down the hill from MSRI. The laboratory, no longer a classified area, is home to a Department of Energy supercomputing facility with a large visualization component. Thurston started a visualization initiative at MSRI, and Eisenbud says he plans to consider whether that area could just as well be covered through a collaboration with the laboratory.

One of the hallmarks of Thurston’s directorship at MSRI was increased attention to public awareness and education. There are critics who say these new directions have diverted attention from research, but Eisenbud does not agree. Thurston “added a great range of programs, and the basic core programs have remained of very high quality,” he remarks. He plans to continue MSRI’s public awareness efforts, with perhaps one public event per year. In the area of education Eisenbud is less certain about MSRI’s role. Mathematics education is something “that I care about a lot,” he says, but it is very difficult for one institute in one place to have much effect. “As the biggest recipient of public funds in mathematics, MSRI has certain responsibilities in these directions,” he points out. “But the resources are very limited, and I think we have to focus our energies carefully to have impact where we can have it.”

MSRI has grown into a sizable operation, with about 1,000 visitors per year staying an average of one month. At any one time there are about 80 mathematicians in residence. Presently, the budget is \$3.3 million, which is fairly small given the large number of people MSRI reaches. With 90 percent of its funding coming from the NSF, MSRI faces the challenge of diversifying its funding to make its financial base more secure. MSRI is not part of the University of California; and while the lack of an institutional host gives the Institute a lot of independence, it also means that MSRI misses out on a degree of financial security and support. Eisenbud says he has started working on ways to strengthen ties to the university. Another important avenue he and the Board of Trustees are pursuing is that of private funding through foundations and corporations.

Eisenbud is looking forward not only to being the director of MSRI but also to being a mathematician there. “My own work has involved a number of different fields, and I like learning mathematics a lot,” he remarks. “So I feel that I’ll profit personally by the flow of mathematics through there, as well as helping the Institute.”

—Allyn Jackson