

Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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Good-bye to the AMS Summer Mathematics Meeting

I grew up in a mathematical family where late August always meant a trip to some western state university campus for the annual AMS-MAA summer mathematics meeting. My sister, who was born on August 30, celebrated her birthday with a group of other children of mathematicians in a dorm room every year. Likewise, our mathematical parents socialized with a regular group of colleagues—the research mathematics community was not that large then, and everybody seemed to know everybody else. When I got my Ph.D. in the late 1960s, I looked forward to gathering with my former fellow Ph.D. students and their families every summer to renew acquaintances. But with the existence now of a variety of specialty conferences in the summer, the annual AMS summer meeting has ceased to be the common gathering point it once was. This year, after years of declining interest, the AMS national summer meeting has been discontinued. While understandable, it saddens me that we have become so balkanized in our professional conference-going.

I believe that mathematics meetings should consist of more than gatherings of specialists. There is value in expository talks to general audiences and in talks making connections among mathematical and related scientific disciplines. There is value in forums where thoughtful people discuss educational reforms or proposed changes, say, in NSF funding. There is value in creating settings like book exhibits that encourage mingling. Most of all, there is value in maintaining a sense of community with fellow mathematicians, not just with, say, fellow commutative ring theorists.

For those who want to see a clear payoff to the above activities, let me take a more pragmatic approach. Specialization can easily promote inbreeding. More catholic contacts among mathematicians are important in advancing the frontiers of research and also in digesting (understanding and organizing) recent advances. When people from different branches of mathematics are socializing, serendipitous lines of discussion can sometimes lead, I have found, to helpful research insights. Similarly, expository talks can suggest lines of reasoning and analogies from other fields that can be useful in one's own research.

Consider what is on the program of the MAA Mathfest in Atlanta, August 1–4: Elliott Lieb's Hedrick Lectures on "Why Is the Material World the Way It Is? A Mathematical View of the Stability of Matter", a number of talks about the life and work of Paul Erdős, two Special Sessions about the implementation and reworking of the NCTM Standards (with members of the NCTM leadership present to hear the concerns of research mathematicians), and a two-day Short Course before the Mathfest on "Epidemiology Modeling" (which draws on the local expertise of the Centers for Disease Control). There will be a number of expository talks by excellent lecturers, such as Philip Straffin speaking on "Excursions in the Geometry of Voting", and Fern Hunt on "Fractal Dimensions, Ergodic Theory and a Peano-like Curve". Of course, there will be a book exhibit and a number of Short Courses on new educational technologies and other instructional innovations.

I hope that in the future the regional AMS meetings will incorporate some of these less specialized features of the Mathfests. I believe it would promote the long-term health of the profession.

—Alan Tucker

Editor's Note: The name of the author of the May editorial was inadvertently deleted. The editorial was written by Susan Friedlander. The *Notices* regrets the omission of her name.